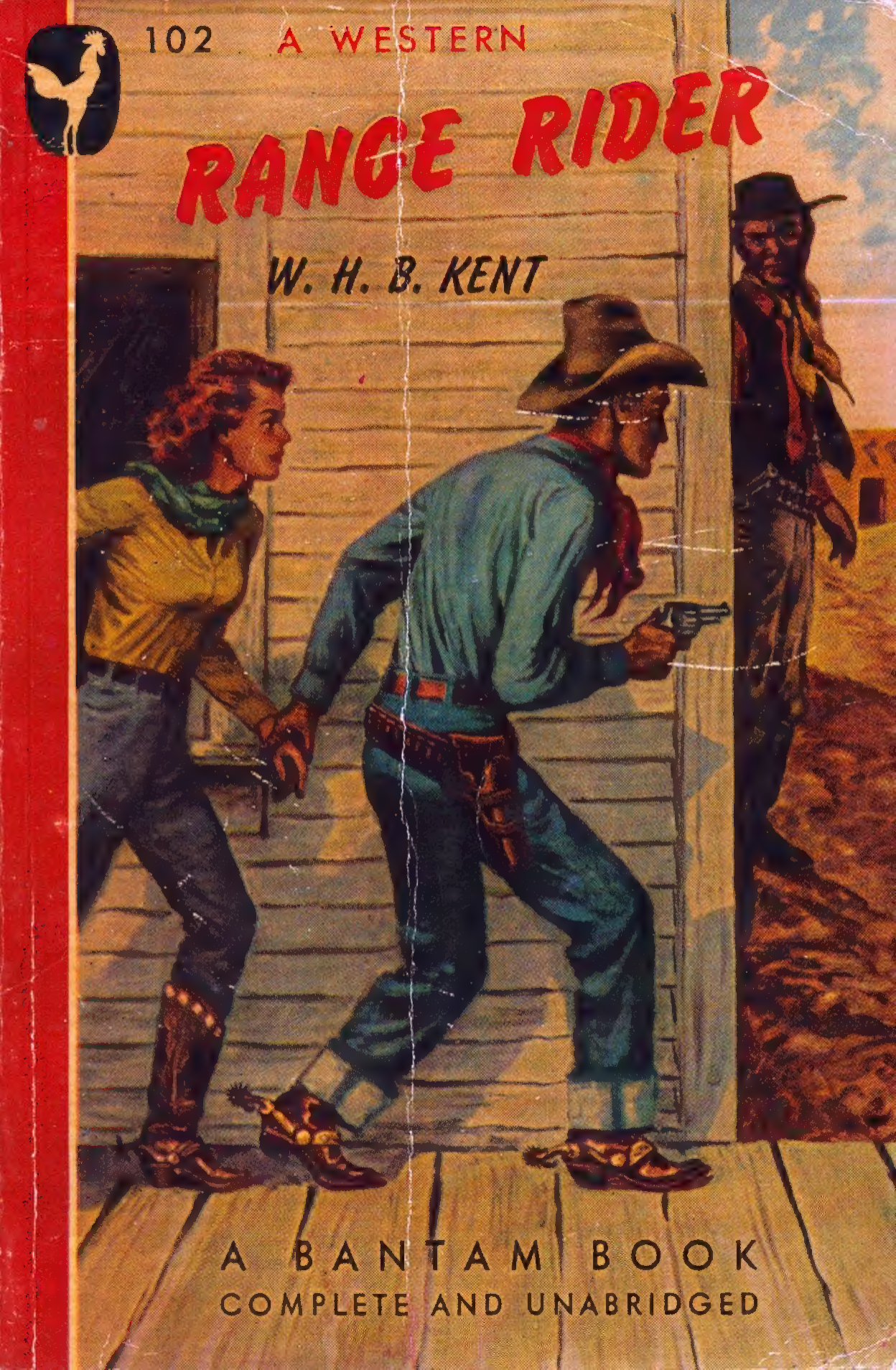
102 A WESTERN
RANGE RIDER
W. H. B. KENT
A BANTAM BOOK
COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

About RANGE RIDER

Stirling eased his horse over so that he could look down on the dead body of Al Meany. "I don't get it," he muttered. "But I know I'm going to dislike the sight of Al Meany dead, a lot more than Al Meany alive." The dead man had been mean, but Stirling couldn't see any reason for this shooting. Then he remembered: Al had witnessed a mysterious woman galloping toward the neighboring ranch, Rocking A. Could there be a tie-in between this woman, the shooting, and the rustling of Arrowhead beef?

The Arrowhead hands, Stirling knew, were just waiting for a chance to show their hate for Cord, boss of the Rocking A. Cord was a big bluff man, who would not hesitate to kill, and there were rumors that he was running beef across the Arizona border.

Suddenly Stirling realized he had wasted enough time. As he started to pull his horse away, he heard the sharp sound of hooves striking the rocky ground. Looking up, he felt a new thrill of fear. Cord and his stocky henchman, Spike, were riding down on him fast . . .

RANGE RIDER

by

W. H. B. KENT

BANTAM BOOKS
NEW YORK

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RANGE RIDER

CAST OF CHARACTERS

Peter Stirling, the tenderfoot who surprised his friends as well as his enemies.

Gail Gordon, tall, blue-eyed owner of Arrowhead ranch, and its herd of over 27,000 head of cattle.

Slim, foreman of Arrowhead. He fooled a lot of people who expected him to act like the lanky, twenty-four-year-old he was.

Saturnino, famous as the best trailer in Arizona.

Idaho could kill a man with his bare hands.

R. Armstrong, mysterious owner of the Rocking A ranch, whom no one alive had ever seen.

Cord, tough foreman of the Rocking A. He acted as if he personally owned all of southern Arizona.

Spike, the kind of man it was better to stay away from.

CHAPTER I

I LOOKED over my shoulder at the dead body of Al Meany lashed on a pack horse.

"I don't get it," I told them. "I don't get it. You fellows are going out to war and get yourselves killed off—or, worse, crippled for life." I grumbled again, "I don't get it."

Slim shoved his horse across the trail. The usual bland grin of affection was gone, and his eyes were cold and hard.

I stirred in the saddle and looked back again at Al Meany. "Yeah." And I spoke bitterly. "Mister Peter Stirling. That's me. Of New York. Go on and say it. And two months in the great Territory of Arizona."

Slim said: "You can always turn your horse and ride for it. Save your poor damn hide."

"Yeah, of course I can. It's a free country. I read that somewhere. Now look, Slim. You're the range boss of the Arrowhead outfit. You draw fifty dollars a month. Saturnino and the rest of us draw thirty dollars a month."

Saturnino flashed his white teeth at me. "And found."

"And found," I agreed. "Beans, beaf, coffee, and dirty blankets and work and sweat. And for that you are going out to get killed."

Slim's eyes were ice-cold. He told me again, "You can turn your horse around."

I looked at the two men sitting their horses facing me. Slim was tall and lanky with yellow hair and a skin astonishingly white where his big black hat protected his forehead. Twenty-three years old, he was already the range

boss of the great Arrowhead outfit. Below the white forehead his face was burned black by sun and wind.

The other, Don Saturnino Gallegas Maria Voca y Sonaita, was from California. A Californio, and always willing to set you right about that. Very dark, with liquid dark eyes and a little pointed black mustache. He had driven a heard of horses from California some time before, sold them to the Arrowhead, and stayed on, indefinitely, working for the outfit.

Both of them had deep creases running out from their eyes—the marks of men who had looked a long time into the vast distances of the desert.

I compared them with myself: we always do that. Only two months before, I had graduated at New Haven. Then, instead of going to Europe, I had the sudden notion to go to the Far West—to what we considered the vast, crude region west of the Hudson. I got off the train in Tucson, Arizona Territory, passed a night in a smelly old Concord stage, and tumbled out into the dusty street of Sacaton City. A barkeep in the Palace Saloon advised me to apply to the Arrowhead outfit for a job.

They took me on and tried to teach a tenderfoot—very much a tenderfoot—a few things about the cow business. Now I had been there two months, and liked it. The first month, there had been trouble, gun trouble, and through sheer luck I had been able to help.

I stopped thinking about myself and looked at my friends Slim and Saturnino. Slim's eyes were still cold as he watched me. Saturnino's eyes held an anxious look.

I think that then I grasped one of the finest things in life: the utter loyalty of a cowpuncher to his outfit. I looked back at Al Meany and shrugged my shoulders. "Well, hell, I have eaten the King's salt."

Saturnino yelled and whacked me on the back. "But of course," he laughed, "Petey has eaten the King's salt, and now he fights for the King."

Slim asked, sourly, "The King's salt? What the hell?"

Saturnino flashed his white teeth. "But of course, my good Slim. It is of the ancient days." He laughed and tried to whack my back again, but I dodged.

The ice in Slim's eyes melted, and the slow grin creased his face. "My, my! But she ain't no king."

Well, there it was. Gail Gordon. Gail Gordon, nineteen years old. Tall and slender, with black hair, deep blue eyes, and an aquiline face. Built of steel, fire, and ice. Gail Gordon, owner of the Arrowhead outfit and twenty-seven thousand head of cattle.

Slim said, "Let's get on with it."

I pulled my horse out of the trail to let the dead body of Al Meany go past.

So we buried Al Meany under the pines on the hill up back of the Arrowhead ranch. Footless, the one-legged cook, blacksmith, and handy man, took a hot iron and burned on a piece of plank all that was known of him: the name he called himself, and the day of his death. It was depressing.

It was the buzzards that brought me down to what had been Al Meany. I had heard the shot the afternoon before but thought some of the boys from the ranch were coming out. I wanted them to come, for company, and hoped it would be Slim and Saturnino. I kept supper back until long after dark, but nobody came. So I ate my beef and beans, took a look at the picketed night horse, and rolled up in the blankets in the dugout—and lay awake for hours listening for Saturnino's genial shout or Slim's cool drawl.

I was riding line for the Arrowhead brand, riding the range line with the Rocking A. The Arrowhead and the Rocking A had always been good friends, working the range together, give and take, and the boys backed one another up in squabbles in Sacaton City or Tucson; but then

the old man who owned the Rocking A let it all slide out of his tired hands and went wherever good cowmen go.

Somebody back East inherited it: a person named R. Armstrong. And R. Armstrong sent out, or hired in Arizona, a man named Cord to run the Rocking A.

It soon became evident that Cord had the curious idea that the Rocking A owned the whole southern half of the Territory of Arizona.

As Slim put it, "You'd think he thinks he is Gawd."

So I was riding line, turning back Rocking A stuff to the east and Arrowhead stuff to the west.

"What," I asked Slim, "if the Rocking A men don't like it?"

"Tell them to go to hell."

"Yeah. And suppose they don't choose to?"

Slim gave me his bland grin. "Then come tell Papa."

"And will you," I told him, "please go to hell?"

Slim grinned. "I might, at that."

So, after two months in Arizona, I was riding line for the Arrowhead. Twenty-three years old, and I had never learned anything that was useful.

In June I was stroking the Yale crew at New London, and Dad supposed that I would take the usual year in Europe before going into the bank in New York—a life sentence.

Or, as he put it, "Two years if you are getting anything out of it."

I don't know why I suddenly decided to go to the Far West instead of Europe. It was considered a very crazy idea. I doubt if any of our people had ever been west of the Hudson. That was the end of the world.

I bought a ticket to San Francisco, and sister Jane stood below the train window. Jane is a great kid though, at eighteen, she is a bit bossy. She seemed quite anxious about my wild adventure, and begged me not to bring back any prairie queen. She said she had a girl all picked out for me.

As the train began a series of wild jerks I told Jane, "I'll do my own picking, thank you, ma'am." I waved to her and old Paulson.

The transcontinental train stopped a long time in Tucson, Arizona Territory. During the wait I wandered around back of the dull red depot and looked at three men on horseback, coming along the dusty street on quick-stepping horses.

The horses were tossing their heads and rolling the bit ring over their tongues. Their feet raised little puffballs of white dust that hung in the still, hot air. It was early morning, and a newly risen sun sent black fantastic shadows ahead.

The three men wore chaps, high-heeled boots and spurs, and low-swung belts with heavy black-handled Colt six-shooters, and had a coil of rope on each saddle. Their dark shirts were white with desert dust. Wide-brimmed hats had the brims flipped straight up over sun- and wind-blackened faces.

Their faces swung toward me and met my eyes with a look of amused contempt. I resented it.

I was Peter Stirling, son of Peter Stirling of New York. Never in my life had I been looked at with amused contempt.

I watched them as they rode past. At last one of them turned to look back at me. He grandly took off his hat and bowed to me, as to a woman. I have never seen him since; but I hope to see him—and tell him a few things.

I did no thinking or planning. I just walked back to the train and got my luggage off, without an idea as to where I was going, or why. Those three hard-faced cowpunchers had drawn a line across my life.

In Tucson I bought a saddle and bridle, chaps, high-heeled boots, spurs, a Stetson hat, a belt and .45 Frontier Model single-action six-shooter and a .44–.40 Winchester rifle. I know, now, that the man went all out selling me the

outfit. As Slim told me afterward, "You looked like a Christmas tree."

After riding all night in the smelly old Concord coach drawn by four horses, I tumbled out into the one dusty street of Sacaton City bleary-eyed, stiff, and yawning, and looked at the signs of the Arrowhead Trading Co., the Arrowhead Corral, the Arrowhead Hotel, the New York Restaurant, the Boston Store, and the Palace Saloon.

The fat, genial, and very friendly barkeep in the Palace Saloon put a huge hand across the bar to shake with me. I told him I wanted a job. I was, I am glad to say, quite frank with him: told him I wanted to learn the cow business.

He slid a bottle along the bar so that it came to rest directly in front of me. He was very helpful. He said: "You try the Arrowhead. I'll give you a note to old Idaho."

"Old Idaho?"

"Yes, old Idaho." And he let it drop. The name seemed fascinating.

I said, "From the signs this Arrowhead seems to own the country."

He laughed. "And she owns half the Palace Saloon."

"She?"

He said, very blandly: "Yes. She. The Arrowhead outfit." He wrote a note. "Show this at the corral, and they will give you an Arrowhead horse to ride out."

I said, "I was thinking of buying a horse."

He laughed. "Why buy?"

So I rode out to the Arrowhead Ranch in the blistering sun of a summer's day in southern Arizona—and looked at Gail Gordon.

And now, after two months, I was riding line for the Arrowhead. Riding the range line for the Arrowhead at thirty dollars a month "and found." Dad, I thought, would love that.

I lived in a dugout in the side of a hill just below the

juniper forest. Once a week somebody brought a pack horse from the ranch with beans, coffee, sugar, flour, baking powder, tobacco, my mail, and a huge chunk of beef. The beef was hung in a gunny sack in a juniper tree, and I tried desperately to eat it all up before it spoiled.

Sometimes Slim and Saturnino would come; sometimes, Al Meany. Sometimes old Idaho would come out, pulling at his long white mustache as he looked down at me from his wise old eyes and asking his eternal question, "Well, Bub, what's on your mind?"

And once Gail Gordon came, explaining that the boys were busy.

She was riding a cowpuncher's saddle, with a coil of rawhide rope at the pommel, her long legs in blue-jean overalls and her black hair in a big braid tucked down inside the back of her jumper. A fine white shirt was open at the throat. I tried to keep my eyes away from where the swelling breasts pushed the jumper open.

"You all right, Peter?" she asked. "You unpack, and I'll start cooking."

We ate lunch cross-legged beside the fire, and I found myself completely drunk. When I looked at the delicious wrinkles that crinkled up around her smiling deep blue eyes, my bones turned to water. I had never before found myself making a squawking noise in my throat before some fool girl.

She washed the tin dishes with sand and ashes, telling me, "You see, Peter, that is the way," and flashed her blue eyes at me for one instant of intimate contact. "You will learn, Peter."

For the first time "Peter" seemed to me to be a very lovely name.

She rode away down the slope, swinging easily to the movement of the horse. On the last ridge she looked back and waved to me and then was gone.

And I stood and cursed myself for a dumb squawking cluck and thought of a thousand brilliant and witty things I could have said.

So when, the next week, that shot slammed along the hills I supposed it was somebody from the ranch. And "somebody" meant, to me, Gail Gordon. But no one came, and I watched an intolerably red sunset die across the desert.

Then the incredibly brilliant stars of Arizona fled across the night and a whippoorwill called mournfully, persistently, "Poor Will. Poor Will."

I awoke to a cold gray dawn. Then the whole east was aflame—the unbelievable miracle of a desert sunrise. Great streamers of light shot away up into the sky and touched the black peaks of the Sacaton Range. The light seemed to come from above and work downward.

It touched the black volcanic cone of the Great Peak of the Sacatons, drifted across the black belt of the pines, on down to the gnarled juniper forest and across me and out onto the gray and red flats of the desert. A way off south the gaunt naked mountains of old Mexico turned a rosy pink. To the west, across the valley of the Sacaton River and the Sacaton Desert, I could see the thin purple line of the Faraway Hills.

Then the sun rose, and instantly it was hot.

It was while I was washing the dishes that I noticed the first buzzard.

The dugout was dug into the hill side just below the edge of the juniper forest. In the arroyo was a fine spring that ran a hundred yards or so before the greedy sand licked it up. I was down by the spring with the tin dishes when I happened to look up and see that speck against the blazing Arizona sky. It came floating down on outspread wings, completely effortless.

Then another speck and another, and I stood up to watch. Floating down the long lanes of the sunshine,

coming down from nowhere to disappear beyond the next ridge.

Buzzards, I thought. Carrion.

Then I remembered the shot of the afternoon before—the shot that had slammed along the hillside and kept me up waiting for some of the boys from the ranch.

I don't know why I became so disturbed. Perhaps it was the solitude, the aloneness.

I took the dishes back and dropped them in a heap and hurried out to where the night horse was picketed. I brought him in, saddled and watered him, and then discovered I was hurrying desperately. So I sat down, rolled a brown-paper cigarette, and tried to practice what old Idaho had told me ("Take your time, Bub—take your time").

I slid up into the saddle, splashed across the little brook, and put the horse up the rocky trail that led, at last, to the Arrowhead. From the top of the ridge I could see the buzzards down in the next draw, crawling in and out of the sagebrush like maggots in dead meat.

Somebody shot a deer and left the offal there, I told myself. Or a dead cow.

The horse picked his way daintily down the rocky trail, around a wide sandy arroyo, and reared straight up to climb a steep bank; and then I was among the buzzards.

The birds took a little run to rise heavily, making raucous cries of anger at my intrusion. They flapped up onto a rocky ridge only fifty yards away, stretched their wings, and moved their filthy naked heads in and out of their shoulders as they croaked their dismal annoyance.

Then down in the sagebrush ahead I saw something that looked like a black and white checked shirt. That, I told myself, is impossible. I kept telling myself it was not so.

I knew of only one black and white checked shirt—Al Meany's special pride.

I disliked Al Meany—disliked him intensely. He was

always riding me, always sneering at the fact that I had been to college, was from New York, had been so short a time in Arizona Territory, knew nothing about the world in which he was (I had to confess) very competent.

But I knew I was going to dislike the sight of Al Meany dead a lot more than that of Al Meany alive.

My horse tossed his head restlessly, and side-stepped quickly, as if he didn't like it at all. When I spurred him he made a big jump, and then I could look directly down at Al Meany.

He had been shot just below the left eye.

A line I had read somewhere came roaring through my mind. "His mouth is stopt with dust."

Al Meany's mouth was not stopt with dust. It was full of flies.

While I sat staring, sick, down at Al Meany I knew two men were riding down out of the juniper forest. This again disturbed the buzzards, and they flapped angrily up to a higher ridge. They stretched their wings again and then settled down to their patient wait until the dead should be delivered to them.

I knew the two men. The big man on the bay horse was Cord, whom the new owner, the eastern heir, had sent out to take charge of the Rocking A. The other man was Spike.

I remembered everything I had heard at the Arrowhead about Cord. He was a rather genial man, they said, a professional hail fellow well met; but he had at once cleaned out the old Rocking A crowd—the crowd that had been good friends and always worked with the Arrowhead. He fired everybody at the layout and then brought in a new and wholly different lot of men. "Killers," old Idaho said. "Killers."

Cord had hooded eyes, but his face was not at all hawk-like. It was massive, heavy-jowled, and he seemed to have to tip his head back to look out from under his heavy lids.

He rested his forearms on the saddle horn and looked down at the dead body of Al Meany. Then he looked at me. "So you couldn't stand Al Meany any more?"

Astonished, I asked, "What do you mean?"

"Well, I don't blame you. He was a poor lot."

"What in hell do you mean?" I flung my outrage at him.

Spike put in with, "We heard the shot and rode right down."

I looked at Spike a long time and did some thinking. There was no back to Spike's head. The line from his neck ran straight up into his hat. His lower lip jutted out beyond the upper. Pale eyes looked at me, unblinking, uninterested, without expression. He was not a human being: pure animal; a predatory beast.

In the hot sunlight, the icy fingers of fear ran up and down my spine.

"You," I told Spike, "are a damn liar."

Spike had his six-shooter in his hand, and I heard the whip lash of Cord's voice, "Spike!"

Spike snarled, "Ain't nobody calling me a liar."

The baleful glare I glimpsed under Cord's heavy lids was almost as frightening as the eyes of Spike.

Spike muttered something and jammed his six-shooter back into the holster.

Cord spoke to me, in a friendly voice. "You see, Mister Stirling, you are new here in the country and you have to be careful what you do."

"And you?" I asked.

Cord shrugged his heavy shoulders.

Then I noticed Spike backing his horse away. He started circling around as though he could not control the animal.

"Stop that!" I told him.

He checked his horse. "Stop what?"

I walked around my horse and, with shaking fingers, pulled the .44–.40 Winchester from the scabbard. With that in my hands I felt better.

"Stop spoiling all the signs," I told Spike.

Cord chuckled in a friendly manner. "Don't take things so seriously, Mister Stirling."

Spike was pleading with Cord, "Now, Cord." I knew what he was begging: he was begging Cord to let him kill me. And I knew he could.

Cord shook his head.

If I live a thousand years I shall never again have so great a heart leap as when I heard a shout. I knew the voice. It was Saturnino—Don Saturnino Gallegas Maria Voca y Sonaita. And if Saturnino was coming then Slim was coming too. I wanted to yell with delight and relief.

But I kept my rifle in my hands and my eyes on Spike.

Saturnino's huge Mexican sombrero came into the corner of my eye. He flashed his white teeth at me in a gay smile.

I heard another voice and heard Cord saying· "Well, Slim, we caught him right at it. I'll let you look after the matter. After all, it's an Arrowhead matter."

Slim's cool drawl: "Yeah, it's an Arrowhead matter. We can handle it."

"If you need witnesses, here is Spike."

"Yeah, sure here is Spike."

Cord spoke reasonably, as one man of the world to another. "You and I, Slim, know how these things happen. Men get sore at each other and then something flares up." He waited a minute. "I'm glad to see he was not shot from behind."

I started a bitter protest and choked it to listen to Slim's patient drawl, "No, he weren't shot in the back."

Curiously, Slim's complete poise seemed to put Cord out. He said, "Well, I'll be going along, Slim. If you need me, you know you can always depend on me."

Slim drawled, "Yeah, I can always depend on you."

Saturnino laughed out loud.

Spike snarled, "Where do you come into this, Mex?"

Suddenly Saturnino had slammed his horse up against Spike, and there was death in his gentle voice: "I am not the Mex. I am the Californio. You say it, Mister Spike."

Cord's whip-lash voice rang out, "Spike!"

Spike chewed his lower lip and waited a long time. "Oh, all right. All right, Mister Californio."

Saturnino's white teeth flashed in a gay smile. "I make the thanks, Mister Spike."

Spike muttered, "We might meet some time."

Saturnino laughed again and bowed from the saddle. "I am sure we meet again."

Cord said, "Well, so long, Slim."

Slim drawled, "So long, Cord."

Cord stuck in his spurs, and his horse jumped. He went into a lope up the slope, and Spike went on after him; but I caught a last gleam from Spike. I shivered.

Slim and Saturnino pushed their horses up and looked at the flies crawling in and out of Al Meany's dead mouth.

Slim was speaking to himself. "From in front. Close. See the powder marks, Sat?"

Saturnino said, "It is so." Then he flashed his white teeth at me, "Why you make the war talk with the Spike person, Petey?"

"He was trying to run his horse around and destroy all the signs."

Saturnino gave a shout of delighted laugher and whacked Slim on the back so that a cloud of dust came out. "But, Slim," he laughed, "what I tell you? What I tell you? Petey is good. I have said it, Petey is good."

Slim gave me a big grin and drawled, "He'll learn—if he lives to grow up." He told Saturnino, "Get down on your hind legs, Sat, and see what you can make of it."

Saturnino growled in mock dismay at getting down on his feet. He hung his huge silver-mounted sombrero on

his saddle horn, and I saw that, as usual, he had the red silk bandanna wrapped around his head. He looked like a story-book pirate.

I watched him with avid interest. He was, I knew, the most expert trailer in Arizona Territory.

Then Slim was giving me orders: "Go up to camp, Petey, and get a horse and pack saddle. Turn the rest of your string loose."

Reluctantly, I shoved the rifle back into the scabbard, flipped the reins up over the horse's head, climbed into the saddle.

As I rode off, Slim's voice followed me. "Keep your eyes on Cord and Spike. See if they really ride along off."

I nodded, and looked back at Saturnino down on his knees in the sagebrush. The red kerchief around his black hair was a brilliant spot of light.

I went on up to the dugout and then to the ridge. Far away to the east Cord and Spike were sloping into the domain of the Rocking A.

I turned the other three horses loose and kept up the old blue for the pack saddle—and Al Meany. I wrapped what food there was in the dugout in the blankets and put them on the shelf hanging by hay wire from the rafters, to keep them from the pack rats.

With the pack saddle on the old blue I rode down to the place of the killing. Suddenly I remembered the buzzards and looked up to see them sitting on the ridges, their filthy naked red heads pulled down into their shoulders, waiting with the patience of buzzards.

Slim was leaning back against his saddle with his arms crossed, nodding his head as Saturnino talked and pointed. I rode up in time to hear: "This is the way of it, Slim. Al Meany, he ride down the trail to go up to Petey as you told him. This other man, on a horse unshod, come down from the junipers."

Slim nodded. "Unshod? But that don't do us no good."

Saturnino spread his hands. "But of course. But I think mebbeso I see the tracks again I know." He went on: "They make the meet. They stay there a little time: I think many minutes. Then they ride together up here. Up here they have no talk. I mean they make no stop. make no quarrel and make the face each other. I have the think, Slim, Al Meany not dream. I think very sudden this other man pull the gun and shoot."

Slim looked down at Al Meany, nodded, and asked, more of himself than of Saturnino, "But why?"

Saturnino spread his hands again. "I do not have the know. But I make the guess the Al Meany see something."

Slim nodded again. "Sure. Sure, Sat. But what did he see?"

Saturnino walked over to his horse and took his sombrero off the saddle horn. He shrugged and spread his hands. "I think the Al Meany see something Mister Cord do not like to have him tell about."

Slim asked, "When?"

Saturnino spread his hands and hunched his shoulders, "Before last night."

I said, "I heard the shot."

They turned to look at me as though surprised that I was still around.

"It was about three o'clock yesterday afternoon. I supposed it was you coming from the ranch, and sat up half the night waiting for you. Then this morning I saw the buzzards and came down to see what it was. Then Cord and that Spike rode down."

Saturnino said, "You see?"

Slim shook his head. "No, Sat, I don't see."

Then Slim shook himself out of thoughts and spoke crisply. "Let's get on with it."

When they turned Al Meany over, the condition of the back of his head, where the bullet came out, made me sick.

At Slim's direction I blindfolded and held the old blue pack horse while they lashed the body of Al Meany across the pack saddle. The horse snorted and shook in terror at the smell of the burden he was to carry.

On the trail home we had the argument about the King's salt. We smoothed that out, but I still couldn't get it. I suppose I went along just because I was there. And there was Gail Gordon. Always, it seemed to me, my thoughts came back to Gail Gordon.

Once, up the steep trail of the last ridge, Slim and Sat readjusted and tightened the ropes that held Al Meany across the pack saddle.

Saturnino spoke in a matter-of-fact voice. "You know, Slim, a dead man is the most hard thing to pack. He won't stay put."

"Sure I know."

We topped the last ridge and could look down into the valley of the Arrowhead.

Slim drawled, "I guess Petey will have to dig another grave."

There it was. The first work I had done on the Arrowhead was to dig a grave for a dead man. I asked: "What the hell is the Territory of Arizona for? Just a place to dig graves?"

Slim grinned at me. "Something like that, Petey."

Saturnino—Don Saturnino Gallegas Maria Voca y Sonaita—put his hands on his saddle horn and looked down at the Arrowhead. He mused, "You know, Slim, the more I look the more I like."

Slim drawled, "It ain't so bad."

I looked at Saturnino with his swarthy face, the thin black mustache, the large dark eyes that could melt with entire friendliness or freeze into something that meant sudden death.

And boyish, towheaded Slim, from Texas, stretching his long legs down into the stirrups and turning his sun-blackened face at us and grinning and drawling. "It ain't so bad." But don't think Slim did not know his business.

I began thinking then of how much I detested amateurs: amateur cowpunchers like myself; amateur cops, amateur writers, and all kinds of people who do not know their jobs. But I suppose you have to learn some way.

Slim woke me out of my dreams with his drawl. "Well, let's get on with it."

Riding down the steep trail, I could see, off to the right, where the river came out from under the hill—came out a full-grown river, to twist against the east ridge and around the home ranch of the Arrowhead and then straighten out on its way to the desert and oblivion. The water sparkled and laughed in the sunlight.

Down to the left was the incredible green of the alfalfa field. A ditch came away from the river and seemed to climb uphill. There was a grove of cottonwoods, and through their tops we could see the whitewashed walls of the old adobe—the headquarters of the Arrowhead outfit.

We splashed across the river, and it seemed dreadful that the water should splash onto the head and feet of Al Meany as he hung across the pack saddle. But Al didn't care.

Then we were riding up to the maze of corrals, and Garvey came out and spat a long stream of tobacco juice. He said, "That's what I thought."

Then old Idaho was there, teetering back and forth on his high heels, pulling at his long white mustache. He said: "That's what I thought. That's what I thought. His saddled horse came in today."

Garvey spat another long string of tobacco juice. "So you jest couldn't stand Al Meany any more?"

I looked at the heavy-set Garvey with his red beard in

patches. I had never seen him shave, but always it was about a half-inch long. I asked, "Will you please go to hell?"

Saturnino laughed and whacked me on the back again. "It is true," he said. "Garvey will go to hell."

I said: "Don't whack me on the back any more. This is the second time I have been accused of the death of Al Meany."

Old Idaho looked at me from amused, wise old eyes. "Take it easy, Bub. Take it easy."

"And I don't like to be called 'Bub.' "

Old Idaho laughed out loud. Then, over his shoulder he threw the sharp words, "Gail! Go back to the house!"

She kept on coming. She walked down and looked at Al Meany hanging across the pack saddle. She whirled at old Idaho with blazing eyes: "The Rocking A?"

Old Idaho looked up at Slim, and Slim nodded. Idaho said: "Yes, the Rocking A. The Rocking A."

Gail Gordon put her clenched hand against her mouth. She seemed to shudder and then straightened up, and I saw that old Idaho had pulled a hand out of his gun belt and laid it across her shoulders.

Her whisper came to me: "Oh, Idaho, Idaho, I thought it would never happen again!" Then I heard her say, "I just cannot stand it."

Idaho asked, "What you want us to do, honey? Jest ride away and give up the Arrowhead? Your father's outfit?"

The girl stopped and looked at us, and at the dead body of Al Meany. She said, "Yes! Let's go away." Then she turned on her heels and went away among the flaming hollyhocks into the whitewashed ranch house.

Slim drawled, "Well, Petey, I reckon you can dig another grave."

On the knoll, under the pine trees, I started digging another grave. There were thirteen before this. I looked

at the slabs of white limestone on which had been crudely carved the names of Gail Gordon's father and mother.

"J. G. Gordon. Died September 9, 1881."

That, I knew, was when Gail was ten years old. I had been told the story: how Gail and her father had been walking along the road in Sacaton City, hand in hand. A man started an argument and then pulled a gun. While the terrified girl hung onto her father's gun hand, her father was shot to death. Not a very nice thing for a young woman to wake up in the night and think about.

They say old Idaho killed the man with his hands, broke the man's neck across his knee.

And now another war had been forced on the Arrowhead.

We wrapped Al Meany in his tarp and shoveled the dirt back in. Saturnino patted the mound with a shovel and asked, "You know what I think, Slim?"

Slim said, "And I don't give a damn."

Unperturbed, Saturnino went on, "I think we do not make the walk away."

Slim said sourly, "Who did think so?"

When we got back down to the ranch Footless was hammering on the iron wagon tire with a long iron bar. He yelled at us, "You saddle bums eating here?"

At suppertime a shapeless Papago Indian woman named Dolores came into the cookhouse, picked up a tray, and filled it with dishes. Then she opened and sniffed at the pots and pans, picked out some food, filled the tray, and went away into the ranch house.

Footless growled, "That Papago."

After supper we wandered down to the bunkhouse in the gathering darkness. Saturnino, Slim, Garvey, and the long-legged towhead Andy Jackson were there, and after a little young Manuel, son of Dolores, came in.

"Where," I asked, "are the rest?"

Slim said, "Out."

Then we heard Idaho calling the slim Indian lad Manuel. Manuel came back in a minute and said Slim and Saturnino were wanted in the house.

Garvey spat into the fireplace and grunted, "A war council."

Slim and Saturnino came back after a while, looking serious. I asked, "What are you going to do?"

Slim said, "Beat that solitaire game."

"And then what?"

"Then I'm going to smack you if you can't stop talking."

CHAPTER II

SLIM's hat was pushed back on his head. He looked absurdly boyish to be the range boss of the Arrowhead. The difference in color between his sun-blackened face and his white upper forehead was startling. He was laying out his interminable game of solitaire. As usual Saturnino sat across the table, his huge hat on his head, and watched the cards.

Garvey had made a last donation to the fireplace and rolled into his blankets across the room. In the next bed Andy Jackson was asleep on his back with his mouth open.

Slim pushed aside an accumulation of dog-eared magazines, spurs, a belt, a box of .44–.40 Winchester cartridges and made room for his cards. The kerosene lamp had no shade. (They called kerosene "coal oil.")

A moth came and fluttered around the lamp. Saturnino cupped his hand and made a quick pass. The moth flew up and then dropped straight down the lamp chimney. The flame flared an instant, left a black mask on the chimney, and then subsided. Afterward I remembered that and thought I should have been warned. But it would not have done any good.

From where I was propped up on the bed I could look across the table to the fire-blackened fireplace and the rifles standing in the chimney corner. The lamplight cast curious dim shapes back in the corners.

Slim carefully laid one card on another.

Saturnino patted his yawn, delicately. "You know what I think, Slim?"

Slim examined his cards, asking in an absent-minded voice, "What do you think?" Then he added, "And I don't give a damn."

Saturnino delicately patted another yawn. "You know, Slim, I think we do not fire Petey."

I came alive and sat up on the edge of the bed. "Fire me!"

Slim drawled, "Yeah?" Then to me, "I forgot to tell you, Petey, you are fired."

"And why?" I asked.

"Gail's orders. She says it ain't your war. Footless is going into Sacaton tomorrow with the buckboard. You'll be in the buckboard."

"Why?"

Slim shrugged.

I thought that over. I asked Slim, "How many people working for the Arrowhead? I mean here on the ranch, out in the camps, and in town?"

Slim played another card. "How many? I dunno. Have to look at the book. About fifty, mebbeso."

I said, "You better hire fifty more."

Slim held a card suspended and looked over at me. "For what?"

"To put me in that buckboard."

Slim and Saturnino looked at each other, and then both broke out laughing. I didn't see anything funny. I turned my back on them, rolled up in a ball in the middle of the bed, and tried to go to sleep.

The next thing I knew Slim was asking, "You saddle bums working here or just riding the grub line?"

There was a dim light coming through the east window —light enough to see Garvey in a chair by the fireplace pulling on his boots, and spitting out a long stream of tobacco juice. I asked, "My Gawd, Garvey, do you chew in your sleep?"

He was surly as usual. "Why not?"

Saturnino's spurs rattled across the room, and Andy Jackson rolled off the bed, completely clothed to boots and spurs, stretched his arms above his head, yawned, picked his belt and gun off the bedpost, wrapped it around his slim hips, and walked out.

It was chilly with the cold of the high desert before sunrise as we walked up to the cook shack. We washed in the tin basins on the bench and rolled a roller towel around, trying to find a dry place. There never is.

Old Idaho was in his usual place at the head of the long table, drinking coffee and pulling at a cigarette. He said, "Morning, Bub."

"It's the middle of the night. I hear I'm fired.'

Idaho grinned at me. "Seems best, Bub. Seems best."

"And I don't like being called 'Bub.' "

Idaho actually laughed out loud.

"I suppose I can still eat here?"

The old man spoke soothingly. "Take it easy, Bub. Take it easy. It ain't your war, you know."

"What you going to do?" I asked.

Idaho gave me a sharp look from ice-blue eyes. After a minute he said, "We'll do whatever has to be done." And later, "The Arrowhead looks after its own."

Footless, leaning back against the sink picking his teeth, shifted around on his peg leg and said, "I'll say she does."

I looked at Footless, propped back against the sink with his peg leg stuck out in front to brace him. Footless, a top hand in his day, going in with blazing guns in the other war and now wearing a wooden leg and cooking for the outfit.

Well, I thought, the Arrowhead looks after its own.

"Now look"—I spoke earnestly to old Idaho—"I don't know much about six-shooters, but I am good with a rifle."

Footless exploded scornfully: "Not know much about

six-shooters? What about what happened last month?" He spoke to the room. "What I done tell? Slickest gunman in the Territory."

I said, "You make me sick."

Idaho spoke gently. "Sorry. It's not your war." There was finality in his voice as he added, "Gail's orders."

"Thank you so much."

Then I got another whack on the back as Saturnino climbed out over the bench.

I snarled at him, "If you do that again, Don Saturnino Gallegas Maria Voca y Sonaita, your grandmamma won't have anything left to paddle."

That seemed to amuse everybody.

CHAPTER III

The level rays of the newly risen sun beat against the white wall of the house. Gail Gordon had pulled over the tall stalk of a hollyhock to look at the upper blossoms. Without turning her head she said, "Peter, Footless will take you to town in the buckboard this morning."

"Footless and who else?"

She looked at me then. "What do you mean?"

I said, "I know all about it" (and wanted to add, "And to hell with it!").

She said, "If you want to work here later on, I am sure there would be a job for you."

I was angry. "It's not likely."

She looked at me then for an instant, a profound sadness in her eyes, and I wanted to tell her I was sorry; but she turned away to speak to Idaho.

Walking down to the bunkhouse, I wondered what my father would think of it all. I was glad he didn't know. I could see him, in New York, pulling on his gloves and getting up into the runabout to drive the grays down to the bank—and old Paulson standing in the door watching him: old Paulson, butler, British man-o'-war's man in his youth, who ruled Dad, Jane, and myself.

Now, in August, they would be in the sloop taking a long reach out to the east to weather Cape Cod, with Paulson in command and Dad and Jane just deck hands.

Suddenly, I was horribly homesick. But I told myself, in the gloom of the bunkhouse, I was not leaving the Territory of Arizona.

I helped Footless harness the two wild buckskin ponies that he drove. The sun was up, and it made the sweat run down into my eyes. I was startled to hear the voice of Gail Gordon, speaking with authority: "Footless, those ponies will kill you. I am going to have Andy Jackson gentle them."

Footless shifted around on his peg leg. "Who? Me?" Then he grumbled, "They don't need no gentling. I like 'em wild."

The buckskins stood straight up in the air. When they came down they were on a dead run. Footless had a contrivance screwed to the floor of the buckboard that held his peg leg. His right foot rode the brake. I just hung on.

At a wild run we dived into the cool, shady tunnel under the cottonwood grove. The leaves of the cottonwoods—shaped, I thought, like an arrowhead—hung still in the dead, hot air. The buckboard bucked and rattled.

Not taking his eyes from the running ponies, Footless nodded toward the left, where we had had the dreadful gun fight only a month ago.

"I'll say you was good, Petey. You was good."

Footless was not referring to my moral qualities. At mention of moral qualities he would have looked at you suspiciously and said, "Hunh?" By "good," he meant I was good with a gun.

"It was luck," I told Footless. "Just luck."

We shot out of the cool tunnel and took the grade at a high run. Halfway up the buckskins tired, dropped to a canter and then to a walk, their sweat-blackened sides heaving. Footless snorted scornfully. "Hunh. Have Andy Jackson gentle 'em?" In that, he poured out his scorn for all gentle things.

Now I didn't have to hang on, and could look back at the Arrowhead. Across the tops of the cottonwoods I could see the white gleam of the main house, the house of Gail Gordon. Above the house I could see the white

tombstones on the knoll. Beyond that the towering hills closed in, and the Sacaton River sprang full-born from under them.

The bright water sparkled in the sun as it swept around the home ranch of the Arrowhead. A ditch came out from the river and climbed the opposite slope. I never could convince myself that the water did not run uphill as the ditch climbed the slope.

Below was the alfalfa field—a thing of indescribable beauty. In the grays and browns of the desert country it shone a lovely green under the hot sun. Beyond the green of the alfalfa the river sparkled in the sunlight: water; life; life to the desert.

We were up the grade now and could look away off south to where the Sacaton River made its turn to the west, and then to the north, to be sucked up at last in the hot sands away beyond Tucson.

It made me sad and moody—to think of all that fresh, sparkling life to die at last, lapped up at last in the dry, hot sands.

On the top of the divide we could look away off to the west, across the valley of the Sacaton to the desert with its patches of leprous white alkali flats and, away beyond, the dim blue line of the Faraway Hills.

Footless said, "Whee!" and the ponies started down the slope at a high run.

I said, "This is no way to handle a team."

"Only way to make time. Let 'em walk up and then run like hell downhill."

"But why make time?"

Footless asked, "Hunh?" Then he yelled, "Whee!!" and the buckskins laid out flat in a wild scamper. I held on.

My saddle and chaps were in a gunny sack lashed down in the back of the buckboard. I pulled up my gun belt to make it ride easier and cuddled the .44–.40 Winchester between my knees. And if Gail Gordon thinks, I told my-

self, that I am not still working for the Arrowhead she is a fool. Then I said a little prayer and begged forgiveness for having called her a fool.

"Hey! For the love of Gawd!" I yelled.

Footless just grinned as he turned the wildly running buckskins at a sharp left angle and roared across the narrow plank bridge. He pulled them up, panting, in front of the Arrowhead Corral in Sacaton City.

I let out a tight-held breath. "Damn you! Why scare a man to death?"

Footless laughed.

I sat there in the buckboard while a whiskered man came out and unhooked the buckskins. I looked at Sacaton City. On the left I could see into the dark, cool depths of the long barn under the sign "Arrowhead Corral." Back home the sign would have read "Arrowhead Livery and Sales Stable."

Across the one dusty street was the covered board walk and then the screen door of the Arrowhead Trading Co. Under the main sign, in small letters, was "If we don't have it we will get it."

Suddenly I wondered if the Arrowhead Trading Co. could get what Gail Gordon needed now.

Up the street on the left was the New York Restaurant —and I wondered why a Canton Chinaman in Arizona Territory should call his eating joint the "New York."

Beyond that was the two-story, unpainted Sacaton Hotel. Across from the New York was a little adobe with a small smudged sign that gave out nothing definite except M.D.

Across from the hotel was the long adobe with the sign "Palace Saloon." That, too, belonged to Gail Gordon.

Beyond the hotel on one side and the Palace on the other there were a few scattered adobes, and then the white dusty road ran up a slope straight through the gray sage and dipped over the hill on its way to Mexico.

Footless asked, "You aiming to live in that buckboard?"

"No." Then I asked him, "Did you see?"

"What?"

As if it was important I lowered my voice. "Spike and those two others just went into the Palace."

Footless swung himself around on his peg leg and put both hands on the wheel below me. "Spike?"

I nodded. "Spike. And two more. Some of the Rocking A killers, I suppose."

Footless looked up the road to the Palace Saloon. Suddenly, in a gust of anger he shook the wheel until the whole buckboard rattled. "I don't like it," he said. "I don't like it." Then he looked up at me, almost pleadingly, as if I could give him the answer, "What you s'pose, Petey? What you s'pose Al Meany saw?"

I shrugged my shoulders at that.

Footless continued to stare up at me and asked again, "Hunh?"

I shrugged again. "I don't know what Al Meany saw—but I'm going to find out before I leave the Territory of Arizona."

Footless laughed, and tried to pull me off the seat. "I knowed Gail couldn't fire you." He spoke earnestly "Course, you know, Gail's jest trying to save your life. That is the way these women be, you know. If they get stuck on you, they want to save your life. They're funny that way."

Suddenly I was walking on air! I owned the earth. So that was why Gail Gordon had fired me! I wanted to wrap my arms around Footless and kiss his dusty unshaven face. But I looked at a thin-lipped, hard-faced man who wandered, apparently quite without aim, out from the cool depths of the long barn and lounged against the front. He rolled a cigarette, broke a match off from a square of sulphur matches, and lit it.

A whiskered man came out from the barn, asking: "Hey,

Footless, you want that buckboard out front all time? Why not run it back around?" Without taking breath he ran on: "Hey, Footless, did you see that gal? Some looker. I'm telling you she was some looker. Did you see her, Footless? She must 'a' been over to the Arrowhead by now. Some looker. What say I run the buckboard around back? Now I'm telling you—"

Footless yelled, "Whiskers, shut your damn mouth!"

Whiskers shut his mouth. He looked surprised, and hurt. He said, "I was jest telling you."

Footless lowered his voice. "Is she in town?"

Whiskers stared blankly for a minute, then grinned and nodded. "Yeh, Footless, she's still here. But she ain't nothing like that."

"Wait a minute," I begged. "Which she are you talking about?"

Whiskers grinned at me and nodded his head sideways up the street. "That friend of Footless. She's still here. But this other, she ain't that kind. Not a-tall."

I happened to be looking at the thin-lipped, hard-faced man lounging back against the front wall of the barn. If I ever saw a man pricking up his ears and listening, he was the one.

I kept on watching the hard-faced one and listening to Whiskers. "Yeh," he was saying, "she come on the stage. And Cord of the Rocking A met the stage beyond the bridge and took her off. He had a buggy, Cord did, and they drove off to the Rocking A."

I thought that over for a while, trying to put things together. "Was there another passenger?"

Whiskers shook his head. "Not ary."

I put some more things together in my head. "And," I asked Whiskers, "on the return trip to Tucson that night the stage was held up and the driver killed?"

Whiskers exploded then. "That warn't right!" he yelled. "That warn't right! 'Tain't right to kill the driver.

No decent holdup man would kill the driver!" He seemed quite sore about the matter.

"You mean it's not according to Hoyle to kill the driver?"

Footless looked up at me. "Hoyle? Hoyle? Don't believe I know him."

And I kept on watching the thin-lipped, hard-faced man lounging against the front of the barn. Without any obvious move, he had shifted his gun around in front.

I said, "Well, to hell with the women—all of them!"—and climbed out of the buckboard, standing in the white dust while Footless and Whiskers ran it through a gate into the corral beside the long barn.

The hard-faced man lounged up to me, his spurs clinking dully in the dust. When he stood close to me, looking up the dusty street, he spoke without moving his lips. "You are taking the night stage for Tucson." After a minute he turned his cold, baleful glare on me. "On the Tucson stage," he said.

Well, I knew what that meant.

If you have never felt that your knees will not hold you up, you have never been there. Again I was horribly homesick. I thought of Dad and Jane and old Paulson in the sloop. I even counted the days and thought that now they would have enough easting to clear Cape Cod.

I suppose I got mad then. I was being run out of the country, being told to get out of Arizona Territory by a hard-faced man who spoke to me with infinite contempt.

He spoke softly. "I'll be seeing you."

I made a fool of myself and snarled at him: "You're damn right you'll be seeing me. Want to start it now?"

The man's eyes shifted around, and he saw Footless and Whiskers coming out of the barn. He said, "Not now," and lounged away up the street. His high-heeled boots brought up little white puffballs of dust. His long-barreled six-shooter swung easily as he walked.

I asked Whiskers, "Who is he?"

Whiskers spread his hands. "I ain't knowing his name. New to me. One of the Rocking A outfit. Damn bad layout they are getting, if you ask me. And they is a lot more I don't know—"

I was astonished and chopped him off. "You say there is a lot more you don't know?"

Whiskers started in to talk again, but Footless broke in with, "Hey, I'm thirsty."

"There's water in the trough out back in the corral," I told him.

Footless blinked. "Hunh? Water?"

We started up toward the Palace Saloon, and I turned things over in my head. So Cord stopped the stage and took a girl off and drove away in a buggy. And that night, on the return trip, the driver was shot and killed. And the hard-faced Rocking A man had told me to leave town. And only Whiskers had seen Cord take the girl off the stage.

It didn't make much sense. Why shouldn't Cord meet the stage and take off a girl? Probably a fancy lady from Tucson.

But why run me out of town? I didn't see it. Perhaps it was tied up with Al Meany. It was too much for me.

The Palace Saloon looked the same. It was something of a shock to me to know that Gail Gordon had a half-interest. The Arrowhead. The Arrowhead looking after its own—providing a decent place for its men to drink and have their fun.

I approved of it, and shook hands with the beaming fat barkeep.

"What will you have?" he asked.

"What you got?" asked Footless.

The fat barkeep laughed and slid a bottle of whisky along the bar so that it came to rest directly in front of me. I was always fascinated by the way Fat slid a bottle the

whole length of the bar, making it stop anywhere he pleased. Glasses slid along in the same way.

Spike and the two lean, dark, mean-looking men were grouped at the end of the bar, cuddling their drinks in their hands. They had stopped talking and were listening.

I remembered seeing them go in. When Footless and I came in I had noticed their horses tied to the hitch rail: two bays and a sorrel. The three horses had their heads down and one hip dropped, trying to sleep, but the flies kept their tails swinging and their skins twitching.

A fly lit on my forehead, and I wished I could do the way horses do: they have muscles under the skin that let them twitch their hide when a fly lights. I looked in the mirror back of the bar and tried to twitch the skin of my forehead. All I did was make a face, but the fly went away.

In the mirror I met the surprised look of Footless. He said, "You ain't so bad-looking, Petey."

"Thanks." I poured out more whisky for us both.

Footless asked, "Hey, Fat, we don't have to pay for this, do we?"

Fat laughed and spoke to me. "Just because the Palace belongs to Arrowhead, Footless is always trying to cadge drinks." He turned amiably to Footless. "You know the orders. No money, no drinks."

Footless mourned, "Ain't life hell?"

I poured more drinks and heard Footless say, "Mebbeso we better get us a slab of dead cow." He told the barkeep, "I'm taking a bottle with me."

The fat barkeep laughed. "You and those buckskins. They'll kill you yet, Footless." He put a bottle of whisky on the bar.

I looked around the Palace Saloon: at the three huge kerosene lamps suspended from the ceiling with the fly-specked tin shades above them; at the roulette, faro, and stud tables, all empty and dead now. They were, I knew, run honestly; and that was a very unusual thing.

Oh, yes, I told myself, the Arrowhead looks after its own—all but me.

I looked at Spike and wanted to vomit. The way his back ran straight up to the top of his head made him seem something not human.

Spike met my eyes for an instant and then turned away. He spoke softly to one of the mean-looking men with him. "I hear the New Yorker is leaving on the stage tonight."

"Yeah. I hear he got fired from the Arrowhead."

I started to say something but met the eye of the barkeep. He shook his head. He came along the bar with his wipe rag, whisking as he worked. "Let it lay, Petey. Let it lay."

I let it lay.

Spike croaked exultantly. The other man snickered. Again Fat whispered, "Let it lay."

I asked Spike, "Where's your friend?"

Spike looked surprised and opened his mouth to say something, and then closed it to listen to the sound of a shot.

It was a dull sound: a shot from some way off, perhaps dulled by being fired indoors. But it was a shot.

Suddenly, all the things that had been milling around in my head clicked together, and I knew: I knew why the shot had been fired, and why Al Meany had been killed. I knew what Al Meany had seen.

I slammed the whisky glass down on the bar and yelled at Footless: "Come on! Damn you, hurry!"

In front of the Palace Saloon the hot sun of Arizona hit me like a blow in the face, and I heard a taunting laugh from Spike and his friends. That taunting laugh told me we should be too late.

"For Christ's sake, Footless, hurry."

Footless was swinging along on his peg leg, with the bottle of whisky clasped in his left arm. He kept asking: "What is it, Petey? What is it, Petey?"

I stopped and walked back to him.

"Don't you see? Can't you see yet?"

Footless asked, "Hunh?"

"But, for Gawd's sake, Footless," I urged, "can't you see what Al Meany saw? And can't you see that Whiskers is dead down there in the corral?"

Footless blinked. "Who? Me? Whiskers? Whiskers dead?"

I wanted to kick him. "And don't you know, my dear Footless"—I spoke slowly and gently—"and don't you know that you and I have seen the same thing that Al Meany and Whiskers saw? And now Al Meany and Whiskers are dead."

I gave him time to let that sink in. "And don't you know that you and I are going to be dead before sunset?"

CHAPTER IV

Footless was swinging along on his peg leg, trying to keep up with me. He kept saying, "Hunh?"

I had an all-gone feeling in the pit of my stomach and tried to tell myself it was hunger. I didn't want to go down into the Arrowhead Corral and look at Whiskers. Besides, what good would that do?

I walked back to where Footless was swinging along. I looked at him and thought, bitterly, The Arrowhead looks after its own. I said, "Let's get some eats."

Footless brightened up. "I could use a piece of dead cow," he said.

We went into the New York Restaurant, and a fat genial Chinaman grinned at us. He said: "Hello, Footless. You want eat?"

"Yeah. We want eat."

"How you like him?"

Footless grumbled, "Just so long it don't bawl when I stick a knife in it."

The Chinaman grinned, "I got," and went out the back door.

The red and white checked tablecloth had rings where other people had eaten and put down dirty dishes. In the middle of the table was a pewter caster with a handle sticking up from a ring of holes that could be turned around. In the holes were cruets that held salt, pepper, vinegar, and mustard. They were all fly-specked.

The Chinaman came back with dishes strung up one arm. He put down our fried beefsteak. It smelled good.

He went away and brought a big dish of baked potatoes. "Bread? No got butter. Stage man forgot."

I said, "No," and Footless asked, "Hunh? No butter?"

I said: "There are thousands of cows around here. How come no butter?"

The nice Chinaman laughed and spread his hands, "You know. Cowman no milk cow. All time beef. No milk."

I said, "They make me sick."

The Chinaman asked, "Tea, coffee, or tea? Raisin pie? Velly goddam good raisin pie."

"All right, and coffee."

Footless only nodded, as he was too busy seeing if the piece of dead cow was going to bawl when he stuck a knife into it. After a minute he said, "Anyway, it's plumb dead."

I wished he hadn't said that, for I was trying to forget something else that I knew was dead. "You suppose those buckskins are through eating?"

Footless protested, "But I was aiming to fool around a little and drive back in the cool of the evening. Better for the buckskins, too, ain't it?"

"Let's get going," I told him.

We were clumping out of the restaurant, and Footless yelled back, "The Arrowhead, Chink."

The Chinaman opened the kitchen door to grin at us. "All light. Arrowhead."

I said: "Stop calling him a Chink. He is as good a man as you or I. Probably better."

Footless looked surprised. "Hunh?"

Under the wooden canopy over the rough plank sidewalk I stopped and looked across at the Palace Saloon. Nothing stirring over there. The one dusty street of Sacaton City was empty, in its whole length. You would think the place had been abandoned, all the people dead or gone away. There wasn't even a stray dog.

The shadows, I noticed, were coming out from the

buildings on the other side of the street—completely black shadows that had hid under the buildings ever since noon.

I thought of going back into the Palace and seeing Fat, but couldn't see what good that would do. The thing to do was to get Footless on a high run for the Arrowhead.

Walking with Footless down the middle of the road, I kicked up the white dust and watched the windows and corners of the buildings.

Our spurs were muted in the deep dust. The blazing sun was two-thirds down in the western sky. I wiped my face with the red silk neck scarf and wished the sweat would not run down into my eyes.

It was quiet at the long barn of the Arrowhead Corral—quiet and shady and cool down the long lane between the stalls. The smell of horses came out to us. A horse snorted and stamped impatiently.

Just inside the wide front entrance, to the right, was the built-in office with two steps up to the door. There was a roll-top desk in there, a cot with tumbled dirty blankets, a box of sand on the floor for a spittoon, a sagging swivel chair. Over in the corner were a few rifles. My eyes picked out my own .44–.40 Winchester.

I heard Footless say, "Christ!"

Whiskers was sitting in the sagging swivel chair, his head laid down on his arm as though taking a nap; but that was his last nap: there was a ghastly hole in the side of his head.

I walked over and picked up my rifle from the stack in the corner. I drew back the lever to make sure there was a cartridge in the magazine. There was a shell in the chamber. I drew it out and looked at it. It had been fired very lately—and I never left a cartridge in the chamber under the hammer.

I told Footless, "They killed him with my rifle."

I felt sick. I went over and sat down on the cot.

After a while I began talking to Footless: "Now look. You got to get those buckskins and drive like hell. Tell Idaho what you have seen here. Tell him what you have heard."

Footless blinked. "What have I heard, Petey?"

I half yelled, "Oh, for Gawd's sake!"

Then I remembered something Slim was always telling me, "Take your time, Petey. Take your time." So I sat down on the cot, threw the empty shell out of the rifle, and ran a cartridge up into the chamber. Then I began running them through to see if the magazine was full. There was only the one. The rest had been taken out.

I refilled the magazine from my belt.

"Now look," I told Footless. "You will get the ponies, and you will run them to death getting back to the ranch. Then you will tell Idaho that Cord got a woman off the stage the other night and the stage driver was killed. And tell him only the driver, Whiskers, and you and I know about it. And now Whiskers is dead. Tell him all that." I looked over at Whiskers again. "And the Arrowhead looks after its own."

Footless spoke quite cheerfully. "I'll say she does."

"Get going," I snarled at him.

Footless went down the two steps and turned to the right into the dusky shadows of the long barn. A horse snorted and stamped impatiently.

There were two windows in the office: one to the south looking into the corral, the other to the west looking out to the street and across to the Arrowhead Trading Co. I thought of the mild, bespectacled young man who ran the store. But there wasn't any help in him.

I heard the snorts of the buckskins and the rattle of wheels. Footless yelled, "Hey, Petey, come open the gate."

I cradled the rifle in my arm and went around to the gate. When I opened it the buckskins came out quite sedately.

Footless said, "You hold 'em, Petey, while I go do my trading."

I said: "You get back in there, and you drive like hell for the ranch. You know what I told you to tell Idaho."

Footless looked uncertain, and I let go the bridle of the near buckskin and kicked him in the belly.

The buckskins surged forward as if shot from a gun. Footless mumbled something and then was busy with the ponies. They started at a wild run, and the bridge gave back a hollow rumble that seemed to rattle all the windows in Sacaton City.

I stepped back inside the wide door of the barn and waited. The shadow from the Arrowhead Trading Co. stretched clear across the street now. The end of the black shadow seemed to be crawling into the door of the barn.

I looked around the edge of the door up the empty street. Not a sign of movement. They ought to be waking up by now.

The emptiness of the street, the deadness of the town in the cool of the evening was a sinister thing. Men ought to be coming out now, straggling up to the Palace Saloon.

I shivered. It's getting chilly, I told myself, and felt a bead of sweat run down across my belly. They will be coming now. Or will they wait until after dark?

Then I began thinking about Footless. The horse in the barn snorted and began stamping again.

I didn't like the idea of staying there in the barn until after dark. Then I got to wondering who would feed and water the horses. Somebody will wander in, I concluded, see Whiskers, and go and see Fat. Fat will look after things.

Then I began worrying about Footless. They would never let Footless reach the ranch. And Footless didn't seem to know what was going on. Or did he? And perhaps I didn't know and was simply going crazy.

I walked back into the gloom of the long barn. The horse that had been snorting and stamping nickered when he saw me. "Why, Stockings!" I said, and walked into the stall beside him.

It was old Idaho's favorite horse—a long, rangy roan with a white nose and four white stockings.

" 'Four white feet and a white nose,' " I quoted. " 'Take off his hide and give him to the crows.' "

Stockings nickered again as I walked down the row of stalls. There were two more horses in stalls beyond. On the other side were four in adjoining stalls with a saddle hung on a peg at each entrance. I went over and looked at the four. They were all Rocking A horses.

I thought of Spike and his two friends up in the Palace Saloon, and the man lounging against the barn when Footless and I had driven up this afternoon. Or was it years and years ago?

I thought, Idaho won't like this.

I went back to the office, kept my eyes away from where Whiskers continued his everlasting nap. I took all the rifles stacked in the corner, ran all the cartridges out of them, then carried them the length of the barn and put them into the water trough. As good a hide-out as any, I thought. The cartridges, I stuffed in my pockets.

Returning to the office, I got my saddle and chaps out of the gunny sack and brought them back to Stockings' stall. Stockings seemed to be very much pleased. As I tightened the cinch I thought again that Idaho would not like having anyone ride hell out of his pet.

I led Stockings back farther down in the barn and dropped the reins on the ground, then untied all the other horses—the two on the same side as Stockings and the four Rocking A horses from the other side. They seemed to be a little uncertain as to what it was all about.

Sliding up onto Stockings, I herded the six out the front door, let down a length of my rope, and lashed out at

them. They crossed the bridge at a run. On the other side three of them broke to the left, the Tucson road, but I herded them back. As I passed the end of the bridge I looked up the street of Sacaton City. There was still no one in sight. That bothered me more than if there had been men with guns.

But I lashed out at the fleeing horses with the rope end, saying to myself, "And now, Mister Spike, try and catch us."

I watched the black line of the sunset shadows creep up the hills. I wondered how long it would take them to get horses and get started. I lashed out at the fleeing horses with the rope end, and then noticed the sweat on Stockings' shoulders. I pulled him down then and let them all go on at an easy lope.

Then I had to laugh out loud. If I drove those four Rocking A horses up to the Arrowhead, it would be a lovely matter. The Rocking A would have a perfect case: four stolen horses in an Arrowhead corral. I had to laugh some more. I was tempted to carry it through.

Then I saw the sorrow-shaded eyes of Gail Gordon, and I jumped Stockings around in front of the six horses. I tried to see the brands on the two that were not Rocking A, but the brands were on the other side.

I turned them and started them back down the road. They were very willing to go. Some people say that horses don't think; but horses remember—they remember where they have eaten heartily and drunk deeply. And if you can't think how can you remember?

Stockings certainly remembered when I turned him around and started up the long hill for the Arrowhead.

We were among the live oaks now: short, squatty trees with little blue-gray leaves—stiff and short. They never relented to the point of whispering in a vagrant breeze.

Up another long slope I caught the acrid smell of juniper: another stiff and unrelenting tree.

I thought: Good Gawd, what a country! Even the trees are unfriendly. Stiff, unbending, hard as the tight-lipped men who live with them.

I saw the sunset shadows creep up the hills ahead of me and looked back over my shoulder. Away across the somber shadows of the Sacaton Desert a spark of fire hung above the Faraway Hills, as though some great red fire flamed up and then went out.

The shadows crept up the black belt of the pines along the Sacaton Range ahead of me, up across the lingering rosy light that held to the Great Peak for an instant and then was gone.

In those southern latitudes, the sun drops nearly straight down, and there is very little twilight. It made me think of the lovely long twilights of summer in Maine: a good place to learn to use a rifle. Two Abenaki guides had taught me that. My thoughts turned to the alder thickets on our Long Island farm, and going after woodchuck. No better training for quick shooting. Dad and Jane and Paulson were in Maine now, somewhere along the coast.

The chill night wind was setting down from the Great Peak, and I was very lonely. The crazy, gibing laughter of a coyote came from the hills.

On the top of the next slope I pulled Stockings up and listened—for the beat of running horses on the road behind me, and for the rattle of the buckboard on the road ahead. There was nothing.

In the next hollow I sniffed and thought I could smell dust still hanging in the air from the buckboard; but I could hear nothing.

The last light of day had gone from the earth when I topped the rise above the Arrowhead. The black sky was alive with glittering stars, but they gave no light to a night-blackened world.

Walking down the long grade to the ranch, I could hear the murmur of the clear water in the river. Stockings

tossed his head and snorted, as though to ask, "What are we waiting for?"

I had thought the stars gave no light, but in the tunnel under the cottonwoods I realized they gave a lot of light. It was black in there.

From the end of the tunnel I saw a dim light on the whitewashed walls of the main ranch house. Dim shadows shifted as though some one moved around with a lantern.

I rode out of the black tunnel and turned to the right into the dim yellow light of the lantern. They had heard me coming, and their faces were all turned toward me. Slim was holding a lantern up. They were grouped around the buckboard looking at it. Beyond the buckboard I saw the drooping heads of the buckskins and ragged ends of reins hanging from their bits.

I saw old Idaho with one hand shoved down inside his gunbelt and the other pulling at his long white mustache. He looked annoyed. Beside him Gail Gordon's white face was lifted to me.

Garvey spat and snorted, "Drunk again."

"You are a liar." He had stirred me up. I liked Footless and disliked Garvey, though what he said might have been true. "Where is he?" I asked.

Slim said, "That's what we are trying to figure out."

Garvey spat contemptuously.

Saturnino's white teeth flashed in the lantern light as he spoke to Slim. "What I tell you? I say Petey come back." Then he laughed and asked me, "You and Footless make the grand time?"

Before I could answer, Idaho asked, "Like that horse, do you, Bub? Like him?"

"Yes."

"Then put him up and feed him."

I was getting angry. They were taking it for granted that Footless had got drunk and rolled off the buckboard, and were just going to let it go at that.

Garvey spat again and started off toward the bunkhouse as though no longer interested. Idaho spoke to him.

"Garvey, put up the buckskins."

"Now look." I told them. "I want to know whether or not Footless was in the buckboard."

Idaho paid no attention. "Saturnino, take an extra saddle horse and the lantern and go down the road. Can't let Footless lay out all night. He might be hurt."

Gail Gordon must have seen something in my face. She came over and put her hand on Stockings' shoulder. "What is it, Peter?"

I told Slim, "Look behind the cushion."

Slim pulled the cushion up from the seat of the buckboard, and the bottle of whisky rolled forward. He snickered and held it up to the lantern. Then he stopped snickering and looked at me. "It ain't been opened."

"Well then"—I spoke bitterly—"they got him."

CHAPTER V

I THOUGHT back about Footless. I remembered coming out of the Palace Saloon after our meeting with Spike and his two gunmen. Footless was cuddling his bottle of whisky under one arm as he swung along with me to the Arrowhead Corral. And I remembered, when the buckskins had fled from the corral, seeing Footless pull up the cushion and deposit the bottle. I was sure he had had no other bottle.

I peered down at the watching faces. "That," I told them, "is like everybody. If a man ever takes a drink, then if anything happens you always say, 'Drunk again.' You make me sick."

Old Idaho spoke soothingly. "Take your time, Bub. Take your time."

Slim said, "Yeah, spill it."

Then I told them about the mean-looking man leaning against the front of the barn when we first got in, about Whiskers' telling us of Cord's taking the girl off the stage and the killing of the stage driver.

Slim broke in. "But I don't get it. I don't get it. Why wouldn't Cord have a woman come up on the stage?"

"Now look." And I told about Spike and his gunmen and their snickers, and about my suddenly remembering that Cord had come for the woman several days before Al Meany was killed.

I wanted to laugh at the question Gail Gordon asked: "What kind of woman was it?"

Saturnino snickered, and Gail Gordon snapped out, "Saturnino!"

Saturnino hid his flashing teeth with his hand.

Idaho said, "Take your time, Bub. Take your time."

Then I told them about Whiskers—about Whiskers with a hole in his head and my rifle recently fired and all the cartridges gone from the magazine.

I told them about taking Stockings and running all the other horses, the four Rocking A, up the road.

Slim fairly yelled. "My Gawd! You didn't run them Rocking A's up here?"

"The hell with you! I ran them back a little later and then tried to catch up with Footless."

Slim said again, "But I don't get it."

Old Idaho was looking with vacant eyes into the outer darkness, pulling with one hand at his long white mustache. In a minute he nodded his head as though he approved of something. He spoke softly, to himself, "It could be. It could be."

Gail Gordon asked, "What is it, Idaho?" I sensed the dread in her voice as she asked again, in a whisper, "What is it, Idaho?"

Idaho's voice cracked out like a whip, "Manuel!"

The slim Indian lad came out of the darkness.

"Put up Stockings and the buckskins."

Manuel unhooked the traces from the buckboard, then came back and got Stockings. The three horses clumped away into the darkness.

Idaho said: "Garvey, climb a horse and ride to all the camps. Bring in all the boys. Tell 'em to drop everything and come."

Garvey spat, grunted, and his spurs rattled away toward the corrals.

Idaho went on, crisply, "Slim, Sat, and me will go find Footless." Then he turned to me. "Can you stay awake until we get back?"

"Yes."

"Take your rifle and stick around out here in the dark. You are looking after the ranch." He added, "And Gail."

My heart did something funny when he said, "And Gail."

"So I get my job back?"

Gail Gordon broke in. "Idaho! You will need all the boys we have here. I can ride to the camps and get them in."

"You cannot."

"But, Idaho—"

"You heard me." Then Idaho added in a whimsical voice, "I've put you over my knee and spanked you, Gail, and I can do it again."

The girl laughed at that and stepped out of the way of the horses that were coming up. She was holding the lantern up, and I could see the deep shadows around her dear eyes. "But that was a long time ago."

Idaho reached for the reins that Sat held out for him. As he slid up into the saddle he chuckled, "Not so long ago, Gail. Not so long ago." He looked down at me. "You heard what I told you."

As he picked up the reins Sat said, "Wait!"

Saturnino cocked his head as if he was listening from one ear, then the other, like a beagle after rabbits. We were all frozen, trying to pick up what Saturnino heard. I heard the dull rasp as Gail worked the lever to shove up the lantern shade, and saw her lips thrust out to blow out the light.

We could hear it then, in the pitch-dark. It seemed infinitely darker now that the silly light of the lantern was gone.

There was the tramp of horses, and a voice. Saturnino whispered, "Two horses." After a minute he added, "And a man who walks."

Then we heard the voice: a long string of bitter curses, repeated over and over again.

Suddenly Slim let out a wild yell, "Footless!"

It was Footless riding a horse, with a man walking beside him. There was the rasp of metal as somebody worked the lever to shove up the lantern shade. Then the flash and stink of a sulphur match and the dull yellow light of the lantern.

A man I had not seen before was riding a roan horse. Andy Jackson was on foot, looking fed up. On a bay horse was Footless.

Dried blood covered all one side of Footless' face. He was still cursing, cursing bitterly.

Idaho snapped out, "Shut your mouth!" He turned his icy eyes to the man on the roan horse, "What's on your mind, Hank? What's on your mind?"

The man on the roan horse, called "Hank," jerked a thumb at Gail Gordon. He spoke truculently, "Now look a-here."

The hand Hank jerked at Gail Gordon was maimed, but I couldn't see how. I looked at his sun- and wind-blackened face, at the desert wrinkles that came out from the end of his eyes, at the down-drawn, bitter mouth.

Hank jerked his maimed hand again in the direction of Gail Gordon. "Now look a-here. When I hired out to the Arrowhead she told me, no matter what happened, I weren't hired to do no shooting. You hear me? No matter what, I weren't to do no shooting!" He dug his feet into his tapaderas and asked angrily, "What the hell kind of a outfit is this?" Then he broke out, talking directly to Gail Gordon. "No, ma'm. I ain't taking my time. I'm stopping that goddam Rocking A running off Arrowhead stuff, and I'm stopping them with a gun!"

Saturnino flashed his white teeth at me. He spoke softly. "Another man has eaten the King's salt."

Hank, on the roan horse, heard the last word and flashed out: "Salt? Salt? Hell, I salted 'em last week. What the hell has salt got to do with it?"

Gail Gordon said: "We are forgetting Footless. Come in, all of you, while I fix him up."

Footless said: "Ain't no need to bother, Gail. I thought, first off, I had a hole plumb through my head. I thought my brains was leaking out."

I was annoyed at the laugh of delight from the men.

Footless asked sourly, "You think I ain't got none?"

Gail Gordon spoke crisply. "Come in."

The Indian lad, Manuel, came out of the darkness, picked up the reins of the two horses, and went away into the darkness.

We went into the house by the front door. This was the first time I had been in the main ranch house of the Arrowhead—Gail Gordon's home.

I thought of that. I was Peter Stirling, son of Peter Stirling the great New York banker, and this was the first time in the two months I had been working for the Arrowhead that I had been invited into the house. Just another hired hand: thirty dollars and found—and get yourself killed off.

The shapeless Papago Indian woman, Dolores, mother of Manuel, came in on silent feet with a basin of hot water and a lot of white cloths. Saturnino said, "I fix."

Gail Gordon asked, "Oh, will you, Saturnino?"

Footless sat down, and while Dolores held the basin Saturnino deftly washed and bandaged Footless' head. He laughed and said, "I think you do not lose the brains, Footless."

Footless growled, "You can go plumb to hell." He got up on his peg leg, shook himself like a wet dog, and told us, "It could 'a' been more clost."

I looked avidly around the long room—the home Gail Gordon had made for herself.

It was a long room with a long ceiling. Beams ran across the ceiling. I could see the ax marks on them. The

floor was of wide planks, and knots stuck up where the softer wood had been worn away. There was a long table of some dark wood, and a wide fireplace of rough stone. The stonework ran up the wall and disappeared in the ceiling. A deer-foot gun rack over the fireplace held two .44–.40 Winchester rifles.

A big brass lamp with a white shade, at one end of the table, lit up the long room. Its light seemed to sink into the dark wood of the table.

There was a long red and gray Navaho rug on the floor. Then two mountain-lion skins with mounted heads and claws. The baleful glass eyes of one of the skins looked directly at me, skeptically.

On the wall were several Mexican serapes. A gorgeous one hung to the right of the fireplace, with the eagle of Mexico and the cactus and serpent.

I heard Idaho say, "Spill it, Hank. Spill it."

Hank jerked his maimed hand in the direction of Gail Gordon, and I could see, now, that the first finger was missing. Another man, I thought, who got his hand caught in a rope.

I heard Hank say, "I'm stopping it with a gun," and then my mind drifted off to our home in New York—to the brownstone house with the black horsehair furniture in the parlor, the white marble table, the Siena marble fireplace and the drawn shades. I wanted to laugh, but was brought back to Arizona Territory by hearing Hank say:

"They is running off Arrowhead stuff! That goddam Cord is stripping the Rocking A—selling it down in Mexico—and taking all the Arrowhead stuff he can pick up!"

Evereybody was looking at Hank. Footless grunted, "Hunh? Arrowhead stuff?"

Hank glared at Gail Gordon. "And I'm stopping it with a gun."

Idaho spoke softly, "Take your time, Hank. Take your time."

"I ain't taking my time."

Saturnino laughed and flashed his white teeth toward me, spreading his hands as though to say: "You see? What did I tell you?"

I looked around at the men. I looked around at them and suddenly felt very bitter. I thought of the years I had spent in prep school—oh, the very best—and the four years at New Haven, stroking the crew at New London two years running. I had been very proud of that.

And what, in all those wasted years, had I learned? What had I learned that would help me in this life? help me with Gail Gordon? Not a damn thing.

The only thing I had learned in all those wasted years was riding horses and snap-shooting at woodcock on Long Island, and going after moose up in the Maine woods. I became, now, very humbly grateful to those two Abenaki guides who had taught me to use a rifle.

I looked around at the men, at old Idaho sunk back in a hickory splint chair, tugging at his long white mustache and looking intently at Hank. Old Idaho, they told me, had killed a man with his hands.

Beyond Idaho was Slim. Young Slim, only two or three years older than I, was range boss of the biggest cow outfit in Arizona Territory.

Slim's hat was on the floor beside his long-shanked spurs. There was a dead line across his forehead where his hat covered his yellow hair and white skin. Below that line his face was burnt black by sun and wind. His eyes were as gray, as icy, and as intent now as those of old Idaho.

"And I ain't taking it," Hank said.

Idaho spoke quietly. "Ain't nobody asking you to take it, Hank. Ain't nobody asking you to take it."

I wished I knew over what long, long trails old Idaho had come to sit now in the Arrowhead ranch house and tug at his white mustache. I noticed his long slim fingers —the fingers that had killed a man.

The huge, silver-loaded Mexican sombrero was resting on the floor beside the expensive high-heeled boots of Don Saturnino Gallegas Maria Voca y Sonaita, the Californio: a thin, sun-blackened face with long, softly dark eyes intent on Hank; a thin black mustache that was twisted to points over a wide, thin-lipped mouth. If I caught his eyes he would flash white teeth at me in a gay smile.

Footless had told me: "Don't never start nothing with Sat. He is jest plain murder." I couldn't believe it. Not gay, friendly Saturnino with the flashing smile.

Andy Jackson was standing against the wall near the front door, his hat in his hands, his gray eyes intent on Idaho. He had the wide shoulders and slim hips of a horseman. I wanted to laugh when I noticed that his freckles had been burned to black points. His sandy hair was long and fell over big, pointed ears. Young, I thought. Not as old as I am.

Hank's hat was on, its wide black brim flipped straight up over his hawklike face. He is older, I thought, between Garvey and Idaho—grown old in the wars. He was talking again, eagerly, sitting on the edge of his chair. The chair was handmade, of unpeeled live oak with a red and white calfskin stretched for the seat and back. I thought of the red and white calfskin vest Cord wore.

"Yes, ma'm." Hank spoke directly to Gail Gordon. "Cord is stripping the Rocking A and selling the stuff down in Mexico. And he is taking along all the Arrowhead stuff he can pick up. Now, ma'm"—he seemed to be trying to reason with a child—"now, ma'm, when I hired out I was told there weren't no shooting on the Arrowhead

range. But I ain't taking it." He spoke gently. "Man and boy, I been working cows for forty years, and I ain't laid off for nobody. Not yet."

Old Idaho growled, "Shut up, Hank."

Hank turned his hard, dark eyes to Idaho, nodded, slid back into the chair; and his spurs rattled as he crossed one long leg over the other.

Dolores had taken the basin of water bloody from Footless' head out back somewhere and now came to the door and looked at Gail Gordon. A short, shapeless, dark woman with a knob of coarse hair. In her opaque Indian eyes I detected love, and anxiety, as she stood there and watched Gail Gordon.

Gail Gordon started to speak, and at last I let myself look at her. Nineteen years old, and the owner of the Arrowhead.

She wore a white dress open at the neck with elbow sleeves. The light from the lamp made a shadow in the lovely hollow at the base of her throat, and my heart turned over. Her faintly aquiline face was propped on her clasped hands, her elbows resting on the dark wood of the table.

Without looking at me she asked: "Peter! This girl Cord took off the stage—what was she like?"

Hank sniggered. "What would she be like?"

Footless broke in. "Huh? Like? Ain't me and Petey been telling you ain't nobody seen her but Whiskers and the stage driver?"

I said, brutally, "And Whiskers and the stage driver are dead"—and was sorry I had said it when I saw the look of sadness in Gail Gordon's eyes.

I remembered again (in all my life I could never forget) that as a young terrified girl in the street of Sacaton City she had hung onto her father's gun hand while a man shot him to death. God!

Then I was thrilled to notice that these hard-bitten cow-

punchers of the Arrowhead were not just listening to the slim girl but really wanted to hear what she was thinking.

She said, "After all, we don't know."

The room had been silent a long time when Idaho asked softly, "What don't we know?"

"We don't know about the girl. She might be what Hank thinks."

I was, naturally, astonished to hear Gail Gordon talk in that frank way about a loose woman. What would sister Jane make of that?

Gail Gordon spoke softly. "You know, she might be a good girl. She might even be R. Armstrong."

"What!" said Idaho, and leaned forward in his chair his icy eyes blazing at the girl. In a hopeless voice he asked, "R. Armstrong?"

Gail Gordon nodded. "R. Armstrong." She waited a moment before going on. "R. Armstrong. You know we don't know anything, not really. All we know is that an R. Armstrong inherited the Rocking A and hired Cord to run it. And Cord discharged all the old Rocking A boys and hired people like Spike."

Suddenly Slim whacked his leg with his open hand, "Well, by Gawd," he half shouted, "it could be!"

Idaho spoke quietly. "Take your time, Slim. Take your time."

Saturnino flashed his white teeth at me, "Hah!" he said. "We have the romance."

Footless threw in: "Huh? Romance? It ain't no romance me feeding breakfast to you grub-line riders."

That loosened the tension, and everybody laughed. Gail Gordon said, "You go to bed, Footless, and Dolores will get breakfast."

Footless turned with his hand on the door latch and looked back at the girl, belligerently. "Hunh? Me? Let that Papago woman raise hell around my kitchen?"

He slammed the door behind him. That seemed to settle what Footless was going to do.

I said: "And if you ask me, that was what Al Meany saw. And so Al Meany died."

Gail Gordon took her firm chin from the castle she had built with her entwined fingers. She struck the table softly, looking at me. "Of course," she said. "Of course. Al Meany saw the girl." She turned to Idaho. "Don't you see, Idaho? If she had been a loose woman it would not have mattered. But those who saw her are dead. Don't you see?"

In the lamplight her dark blue eyes were black—black and wide and frightened. She said, "We must do something." Then: "Did Garvey get away to ride the camps?"

Slim nodded. "Yeah. They'll be drifting in, come dawn."

Gail Gordon looked up at the tall clock on the mantel over the wide fireplace. A piñon log broke with a dull noise, and sparks and white ashes drifted up the maw of the chimney. I could see the yellow glint of the pendulum as it swung back and forth across an open place in the painted glass.

Gail Gordon said: "You'll have to get Footless to fix it, Idaho. It doesn't strike."

Idaho slid up to his great height. His spurs rattled as he went over and patted the girl's shoulder, and his voice was astonishingly soft. "Don't worry, Gail," he half whispered. "We'll see about the girl."

Hank broke in, "And the Arrowhead stuff?"

Gail Gordon turned her head and laughed. "I really believe, Hank, that cows are more important to you than human beings."

Hank was on his feet, apologizing. "Well, now, ma'm, I wouldn't go so far as to say that."

Gail Gordon laughed again. "It's all right, Hank. We'll look after the Arrowhead stock."

Yeah, I thought bitterly, the Arrowhead looks after its own.

Outside, in the chill high desert night it was black dark with only the pinpoints of the remote, indifferent stars. I snarled at Slim, "To hell it does!"

Slim asked mildly, "To hell it does what?"

I told him, sourly, "Ride a rocking horse to Banbury Cross."

Slim chuckled and let it go.

The lamp in the bunkhouse had been left turned up too high, and the chimney was smoked. Andy Jackson was already snoring. Hank had pulled off one boot and was looking at his dirty toes. I looked for a sock but didn't see any.

Hank said: "Hey, Slim, turn the lamp down. She's smoking."

Slim asked, "You couldn't 'a' done it your own self?"

"That wild sorrel stepped on my toes." Hank went on examining them.

Sat asked, "You make the card game tonight, Slim?"

"It ain't tonight. It's this morning. And I rolls them up."

Slim's lips puffed out as he blew out the lamp. Hank protested, "Hey!" Then I heard spurred boots being dragged off and dropped on the floor. Bedsprings groaned and complained, and there was the soft rustle of clothes and blankets.

I lay back on the blankets with my hands clasped behind my head, trying to think about things: Al Meany, Whiskers, the stage driver, Footless, and myself.

Maybe my thoughts drifted to home, or maybe I was dreaming. I saw the big, gloomy, high-ceilinged room that was Dad's private office in the big bank in New York —the ornate Florentine mantel and the painting of grandfather Stirling over the fireplace. I could see Dad with the long, thin black cigar in his teeth looking at me

and then up at the portrait. "You favor him," Dad seemed to say. And I could see the big flat-top desks shoved together, with Dad's chair on his side and mine facing him across the other, quite empty, desk.

I had dangled my legs there as a small boy. Back from prep school and, later, from college, I had found that my feet were flat on the floor while I argued for more money than my regular allowance.

And I could see the leather upholstered chair at the left of Dad's desk where men came in and sat and told their troubles. Some of them went out with a new lease on life: others, I knew, went out and shot themselves.

Again I could see my chair across from Dad, and hear him say, "You'll sit there, Peter, until you come around and take my chair."

But I knew I would never sit in either of those chairs.

CHAPTER VI

The next thing I knew, the window to the east was a dull blur of light and the bunkhouse was filled with laughing, talking men. I rolled over and sat on the edge of the bed. Across the room Andy Jackson rolled off his bed and stood up, completely clothed even to boots and spurs. He took his chaps and gun belt off the bedpost, wrapped them around his slim hips, and started for the door.

A man yelled, "Hey, Andy, ain't you gonna kiss me?"

As usual, Andy Jackson paid no attention, just went on out.

Garvey, as usual, was sitting by the fireplace, spitting long streams of tobacco juice into the smoldering fire.

"So you got back?"

Garvey answered me in his surly voice, "What's it to you?"

"Nothing. Only I hoped you wouldn't."

Garvey spat again, contemptuously.

I looked at the men of the Arrowhead and tried to sort them out. At first they looked all alike: young, with wide shoulders, narrow hips, and bow legs; dusty, unshaven, tired, hilarious, and elated over something.

One man asked, "How about this gal at the Rocking A?"

Another said: "I hope she's got long legs. I like 'em with long legs."

They went on from there. I thought, If they mention Gail Gordon with their obscene tongues I'll shoot their goddam guts out.

Then, suddenly, I realized that their talk was not at all obscene. It was lusty, male bunkhouse talk. They would be the first to spread a red velvet cloak before the unknown girl of the Rocking A—if she was a good girl; but they had to talk.

Footless began making a great uproar by beating an iron tire with a steel bar. Somebody yelled, "My Gawd, ain't nobody killed Footless yet?"

They jammed into the door of the bunkhouse, fighting one another and pulling one another back from the door, spilling out hilariously into the chilly dawn.

Following them out, I washed in a tin basin on the bench at the cook shack and went in to a curiously subdued breakfast. Then I saw the reason why. For the first time in the two months I had been at the Arrowhead, Gail Gordon was sitting at one end of the long table.

As I came in I heard some of their greetings: "Hi, Gail." "How's the old lady?" "What's on your mind, Gail?"

I climbed over a bench and sat down in an empty place. Slim took his knife out of his mouth and pointed it at me, "Meet Mister Peter Stirling." After a minute he added, "Of New York."

A man asked, in a voice he tried to make wondering, "Did you say 'of New York'?"

Slim nodded. "Yeah. Of New York."

Somebody asked, "Did you say Mister Peter Stirling—of New York?"

"Yeah."

"My goodness!"

I choked over my food and started to say, "And if you—" Catching the amused eyes of Gail Gordon, I swallowed.

Covertly I watched Gail Gordon. She again had her elbows on the table and had built a castle with her fingers. I noticed the look of love and pride she swept along the table. Yes, that was it: pride.

Pride in the men of the Arrowhead: men who, at thirty dollars a month—and found—would go out at a nod of her shapely head to shoot and fight and die.

Not especially for her. Not at all for her—from loyalty to the outfit that, for the time, happened to be paying their meager wages.

What do they get out of it? I grumbled to myself. What do they get out of it?

A lot of these men, before the week was out, would feel their six-shooters bucking in their hands, and their rifle barrels would be hotter than the sun could make them.

As the men finished eating they wiped their unshaved lips on their sleeves and climbed noisily out over the benches. Their spurs rattled. I would wait until the man who had made the last insulting remark of "My goodness!" was on his way out. I followed him.

On the way down to the bunkhouse they were pushing one another, trying to trip one another up. I was glad to see that the man I was looking for was as tall as I and a little heavier.

I took him by the shoulders and whirled him around. "If you've got the guts," I told him, "to take off your gun and fight like a man, I'll knock your teeth out the back of your head."

I almost laughed at the utter amazement on his face. But I was still mad and seeing red.

"If you haven't the guts to do that," I told him, "come down in the grove, and I'll shoot it out with you."

My ears realized the dead quietness now. Men, I knew, had halted in their tracks and were looking at us. I heard spurs rattling and somebody running, but I was keeping my eyes on the man.

Then Saturnino had laid his arm across my shoulders and yanked me against him. "But, Petey," he was yelling,

"but, Petey, you do not make the understand." Saturnino shook me and laughed.

"It is because they love you they make the talk. If they do not love you, they very much let you alone."

Again I saw a great white light. I looked at the man I had wanted to fight and saw a real concern in his eyes. I held out my hand to him. "I'm sorry," I told him. "I want to apologize."

The lean, hard-bitten cowpuncher grinned in embarrassment as he shook my hand. "Don't mention it," he begged me. "Don't mention it."

Somebody, in a ladylike, high falsetto voice, said, "My goodness!"

Everybody sent up a roar of laughter, and I laughed with them. I felt good.

I heard Slim ask Saturnino, "Think he'll live to grow up?"

Saturnino shook his head. "And if he did, what would be the good of it?"

Then Slim spoke to him soberly. "Get Hank, Garvey, and Andy Jackson, and come to the house. War talk. Tell the rest of the boys to ketch up fresh horses."

I wished they had called me in on the war council, but knew I didn't rate that. I went into the bunkhouse and got my chaps and gun belt, then followed the boys down to the corral.

Somebody had run a bunch of horses into the corral, and Andy Jackson was in there with a coil of rope in his left hand. From his right hand an open loop dragged on the ground. The bunch of horses inside the corral walls were walking around, watching Andy.

Without, as far as I could see, a single quiver of Andy Jackson's arms the open loop leaped out, snakelike, and settled over the neck of a roan. I was as surprised as the horse.

Andy Jackson said, laconically, "Come git him."

A man said, "Andy, I want that sorrel with a white hind foot."

Again the horses circled around the corral, raising a white dust. Andy's snakelike rope slid out over the sorrel's neck, and again he said, "Come git 'im."

Stockings was in the bunch circling around the corral with wary eyes on Andy Jackson. I said, "I'll take Stockings."

A burst of laughter went up then. I heard a man say, "He says he'll take Stockings."

Andy's rope whipped out again and settled over the neck of Stockings. Again Andy said, "Come git him."

As I opened the corral gate and slid in, sideways, I heard a man say, "Well, I'll be damned!" Another man said, "Hey, Pete, Stockings is Idaho's private horse."

I said, "Then he ought to be good."

Andy Jackson flipped his rope again. He said, "I got mine. He'p yo'seffs."

I wrapped my hands in Stockings' mane and led him up to the saddle shed. I slipped the bridle over his head and was sorry to put that dreadful Spanish bit into his mouth. Stockings stamped one of his white feet and rolled the bit roller over his tongue. He didn't seem to mind. I slid up into the saddle and looked at old Idaho.

Idaho, as usual, had one hand slid down inside his gun belt. The other hand was pulling at his mustache.

"Like him, do you, Bub? Like him?" he asked.

"If he was a real horse I could learn to like him," I told Idaho.

Idaho chuckled. Then, to my great astonishment he said, "Take care of him, Bub. Take care of him."

I sat there in the saddle and stared at the old man's broad back as he went down toward the corrals. I had expected a fight over Stockings. And old Idaho was letting me ride his pet, private horse. I couldn't get it.

I touched Stockings with the side of my foot, and we

moved down toward the corrals. He, Stockings, tossed his head and ran the bit ring over his tongue. I said, "Take your time, Stockings. Take your time."

Stockings tried to put his head down between his knees and buck me off, out of sheer joy. I yanked his head up.

There was a bunch of them down by the corrals. Lean, sunburned swarthy young fellows, with six-shooters at their hips and .44–.40 Winchester rifles in the scabbards under their left legs.

They were gathering into three groups. I rode into the group where Saturnino was trying to keep a mean black from bucking.

Sat flashed his white teeth at me, asking, "You make the ride with us, Petey?"

"No. I've been fired. I don't work for the Arrowhead now."

Idaho chuckled and advised me, "Take your time, Bub. Take your time."

Over my shoulder I saw Gail Gordon standing there. In the early light her eyes seemed sadder than ever. She was watching her men ride away—and the dear Lord knew how many would come back.

While I was looking back at Gail Gordon, Stockings got his head, put his head down between his knees and went bucking down the slope. I heard derisive yells of "Ride 'im, cowboy! Ride 'im!"

I finally got Stockings' head up from between his knees, and we trotted back up to join the gang. I apologized to them for Stockings. "He just wants to go," I explained.

They laughed at that, but I don't know if they were laughing at me or at Stockings.

It was cool and shady in the tunnel under the cottonwoods. I could not keep my eyes from looking down into those depths where we had had the dreadful fight six

weeks ago and I had had the sheer luck to kill instead of being killed.*

A man murmured, "I'll say Petey was good."

"Will you close your trap, or shall I do it?" That fight six weeks ago had made it clear to me that I did not like to kill men.

Don Saturnino Gallegas Maria Voca y Sonaita flashed me a gay smile, as much as to say, "Don't let it get you down, Petey."

I shrugged my shoulders.

The incredible green of the alfalfa field was on our right, and somebody said: "She's showing blue. She ought to be cut."

I thought, They are riding out to get killed, and they are thinking about an alfalfa field.

We splashed into the river and stopped to let the horses drink. Stockings stuck his nose down into the bright water then threw his head up and snorted. Somebody said, "He must 'a' seen a fish."

Stockings stuck his white nose back into the glinting river. I leaned down from the saddle, scooped up some water in my hat and joined Stockings in drinking deeply.

Water, I thought. Water in the desert. Life!

We went single file up the long slope beyond the Sacaton River and the Arrowhead. I looked around at the men and counted them.

Nine, I counted. Nine carrying the war to the Rocking A. I looked them over again. Don Saturnino and myself, and seven more of the Arrowhead men. Lean, hard-bitten, with sunburnt faces. Suddenly I had the thought, If they were working for the Rocking A it woud be the same way. But I couldn't agree to that: these men were Arrowhead men.

As we rode up the steep slope away from the home ranch

* See "The Tenderfoot," by W. H. B. Kent.

of the Arrowhead, I twisted around in the saddle and looked back. The river sparkled in the sunlight. The sun was intolerably hot.

The green of the alfalfa field still astonished me. I remembered one of the boys saying, "She ought to be cut."

Beyond the sparkle of the river were the cottonwoods, sticking straight up into the sky, their dark green leaves hanging lifeless in the hot, dead air. Beyond the cottonwood grove I could see one corner of the whitewashed "big house" of the Arrowhead.

From the top of the ridge I looked back again at the gay sparkle of the life-giving water in the river. The river, I thought, is just as indifferent as the stars.

Then Stockings pitched down over the other slope and the Arrowhead was lost to me.

I looked along the line of horsemen. Saturnino was riding in front. Then down the narrow trail through the sagebrush were seven men of the Arrowhead. I brought up the rear. They still looked all alike to me. Wide shoulders, lean hips, sun-blackened faces. And young. I began to wonder what became of old cowpunchers.

It came to me that there were no old cowpunchers. There was old Idaho, and Footless. Hank must be at least thirty-five, and Garvey must be forty or so—an old, old man.

I asked the man ahead of me, "Where are the old men?"

He turned his sun-blackened face around to me, "Huh?"

I asked again: "Where are the old men? Where are the cowpunchers who grew old in service?"

The man took off his wide-brimmed hat and hung it on his saddle horn. He scratched his head of black hair.

"Come to think of it, I ain't knowing." He seemed to roll the idea over in his head just as Stockings rolled the bit ring. "I reckon the old cowpunchers are dead."

"Yeah," I answered him, "dead and gone to hell."

He picked his hat off the saddle horn, pulled it down over his eyes, switched around in his saddle and said over his shoulder, "I wouldn't know about that."

"But you are going to learn all about it very soon." I added, "And God rest your soul!"

He looked back and laughed.

I recognized the wide sandy wash that led up to Bull Spring: to Bull Spring, where I had lived in a dugout—lived alone in a dugout, riding line for the Arrowhead, turning Rocking A stuff back to the east and Arrowhead stuff to the west, and hoping always that Gail Gordon would come again.

Bull Spring, where I had heard the shot that killed Al Meany and seen the buzzards. Damn the buzzards! Al Meany lying there with his white and black checked shirt and the back blown out of his head.

I realized that Saturnino had halted us in the sandy wash. He came riding back, and I told him, "The shoe on the near front hoof is loose."

Saturnino looked at me and then leaned over to see the hoof. He flashed his white teeth at me. "But, Petey," he said, "you make the too much look-see."

"In New York we look after our horses."

The Arrowhead men laughed. Somebody dug in his pockets and produced two horseshoe nails. They found the right rock and tightened the shoe.

Then Saturnino was talking to the rest of us. Telling us where Slim and Hank and the rest of the boys had gone. He told us all what to do. It seemed that all I had to do was to ride up into the pines and just stay there. If I saw anything, if I needed help, I was to put up a column of smoke.

"That is all, Petey," Saturnino was telling me, "—just a smoke. Then right away quick men come to help you."

"Just a smoke. Ain't that lovely? And suppose the smoke comes from guns?"

Saturnino was on foot looking up at me. He laughed. "That would be very good luck."

Then I noticed the men had drifted away. Only Saturnino and I were left there in the wide sandy wash. And the shadows were again creeping out from under the hills.

Well, I thought, the Bull Spring Wash is a long way from the Arrowhead. I watched the shadows creeping out from under the hills. They were about to engulf Saturnino and me.

Saturnino put his hand on my knee and clutched it. "You make the ride up the ridge, Petey—into the pine country. Then, you need help, you make the smoke."

I said, "Muy bueno."

I rode up the sandy wash and looked back. Don Saturnino was at the shoulder of his horse rolling a cigarette. I could almost hear, and smell, the sulphur match that lit his cigarette. I saw him draw a deep drag of smoke and let it go gently out his nose. I wondered if I should ever see him again. I wanted to go back and put my arms around his shoulders and tell him how much I loved him; but of course you couldn't do that. I kicked up Stockings.

Then I caught a signal from Saturnino. He was on his horse motioning to me to come back. When we rode up together I saw, for the first time, a completely serious Don Saturnino. He said, "You know, Petey, you and Footless make the only people who know about the Rocking A woman. I mean, the rest have all died."

I nodded, "I know that."

Saturnino brooded for a minute, sad-eyed, looking up at the Great Peak of the Sacatones. He took his eyes away from that, and when he turned his face to me the old Saturnino flashed his gay smile at me. "All of us," he said, "have eaten the King's salt."

He turned his horse on its hind legs and rode away down

the wide sandy wash. I sat there on Stockings looking after him. He never turned to look back.

When Saturnino had disappeared around a bend in the wash I turned Stockings and angled up the rocky hillside—up through the sage and greasewood, up into the juniper forest where the smell tingled in my nose. The stiff branches of the junipers rasped on the leather of my chaps, and I knew why chaps were invented. The juniper fell away below, and straggling, stunted pines came down to meet me.

We climbed up and up, and then the great pines were all around us and Stockings' feet were silent in the forest floor. The trunks of the pines were yellow—great yellow flakes of bark. They did not have the same smell as the white pines in Maine.

They were up there now, I was thinking. Dad and Paulson had let sister Jane off at Bar Harbor, and they had gone on to the Maine coast, picked up our two Abenaki guides, and gone into the woods after a moose.

I sniffed the smell of the yellow pines and had no desire to be with Dad and Paulson. I realized that a man hunt was the greatest of all sports. I thought, contemptuously, of the men I knew who considered themselves "sportsmen."

Sportsmen! And had they ever hunted a man—a man with a gun who was quite as able as they were? And more willing than they to start shooting? Like Garvey I suddenly spat, contemptuously. "Sportsmen!"

Stockings put out his front legs, and we slid down a steep bank into a bright brook. Stockings stuck his white nose into the water and snorted, blowing the water up. I slid off and took the bit out of his mouth so he could get a real good drink. I folded up my hatbrim and dished out water to drink myself. It was good water, clean and cold.

I slid the bit back into Stockings' willing mouth, and

we climbed the other slope, up through the big yellow pines. Arizona Territory, I was thinking. The Territory of Arizona. And I used to suppose Arizona was all hot sand.

Stockings walked up another slope and came out in a flat that was a fairy world to me. On that flat we were in a fairy forest of quaking aspen: white trunks that looked like slim maidens; delicate leaves on long stalks that moved in the dead air. I remembered the old legend that the Cross was made out of quaking aspen, and that the leaves of the quaking aspen still shivered because of that—shivered in horror.

There was wild-pea vine under the aspens. Peach of a range, I thought. Why don't they put them up here?

The late afternoon sun slanted through the clean white trunks of the aspen. It was a lovely place. I could hear water murmur. I thought, I'll make camp here and then climb the ridge on foot to look-see.

I nudged Stockings, but he refused to move. I came alive to what was going on in the world!

Stockings' pointed ears stuck straight forward. I asked him, gently, "What do you hear, Stockings? What do you hear?"

Stockings flicked his ears and then pointed them straight forward. I could feel the quiver of his great muscles.

I said soothingly, "Take your time, Stockings—take your time," and almost laughed as I realized I was quoting old Idaho.

I slid out of the saddle and pulled the .44–.40 Winchester out of the scabbard. Stockings still had his head up, ears pointed forward. He seemed to be listening, but I couldn't hear anything. Then he put his head down and nudged me with his nose. "What is it, Stockings? What is it?" I whispered. Stockings nudged me again with his white nose.

Then, suddenly, I was afraid.

I was scared. I looked all around through the green white trunks of the quaking aspen and was sure that somebody was watching me.

Somebody was watching me, and I felt as open, as exposed, as lonely, as a lighthouse on a sandspit. I tried to get hold of myself. Stockings nudged me again, almost knocking me off my feet. I took it out on Stockings. I cursed him bitterly. He nudged me again.

I dropped the reins over Stockings' head and started walking. I looked back at the horse and saw that he was looking at me. Then he dropped his head and began eating the wild-pea vines. He seemed to think that everything was now all right.

Just in case, I thought, and carried the cocked rifle in both hands across my belly.

I walked around a clump of young quaking aspen and looked at the muzzle of a .45 Colt six-shooter.

The Colt was held in two trembling hands. It waved, and I was scared. A gun in the hands of a scared woman! I thought.

"Take your time," I told her. "Take your time."

I noticed only that a fair-haired girl was on her knees beside the body of a man. And she was trying to keep a .45 Colt six-shooter steady in both hands.

I looked down at the body of the man there in the green of wild-pea vines. The late sun sent long golden beams through the white trunks of the quaking aspen—long, searching fingers of light that rested on the man lying there.

I walked a step forward and looked down. It was Slim —Slim, with blood all over his face.

CHAPTER VII

I SLAMMED at the girl, "Point that goddam gun somewhere else!" and went down on my knees beside Slim. I threw my hat down. "Get that full of water. And hurry, you fool!"

She dropped the gun, picked up my hat, and went away through the trees. With as gentle fingers as I could manage I began exploring Slim's head. With enormous relief I felt sure it was nothing but a glancing shot along the side of the skull over the left ear. I pried around again with my fingers, trying to find a fracture. Slim stirred and muttered.

The girl came back with my hat full of water. I said, "Get me some cloth."

She looked blankly at me. "Cloth? I have no cloth."

"Now look. I have a sister and I know how much cloth she has hung on her. Get me some cloth!"

The girl gasped, "Oh!" Then she handed me a white underskirt.

"Tear it up."

I washed the blood off Slim's face. I met the stricken eyes of the girl. She whispered, "Is he all right?"

I asked her, "Did you shoot him?"

She gave me the most astonished look I have ever seen.

"Vermont," I asked, "or the Hampshire Grants?"

She said, "Vermont." Then she flared out. "Yes, Vermont—and proud of it. And what business is it of yours?"

I said, "Your English is faulty."

I had washed the blood off Slim's face. Under the cold water he came alive. He muttered and spluttered and cursed, then sat up and blinked at me.

"Goddam you, Petey."

"Take your time, Slim. Take your time. You ought to ask, 'What hit me?' "

"I know goddam well what hit me. And when I get that—"

"There are ladies present."

The girl was down on her knees again on the other side of Slim. "Do you really think he is all right?"

I told her, gravely, "No, he will never be all right." I went on with it, trying to cheer up Slim. "You see, he was not born that way." I let my imagination run loose. "Slim never was born. They found him under a cow chip some where in west Texas. And why they didn't step on it, I don't know."

Slim was sitting up now. I began to be anxious about the rest of the Arrowhead men and asked him, "What happened?"

The girl broke in, "It was one of those horrible Arrowhead gunmen!"

I looked at her. "Please say that again."

She said, "It was one of those horrible hired killers of the Arrowhead."

I looked at Slim, and Slim looked at me. Then we both burst out laughing. I sat back on my spurs and looked at the girl. Not my kind. I suppose I was comparing her with Gail Gordon. A redhead. A redhead with green eyes. But the girl was not looking at me: she was looking at Slim. I was astonished at the softness of her eyes. I asked her:

"So it was one of those horrible hired killers of the Arrowhead?"

"Of course."

Slim laughed and made an effort to get to his feet. I pushed him back. I told him, "Let it lay. We got to figure on this."

I asked the girl, "What's your name?"

"Armstrong. Ruth Armstrong."

Slim and I looked at each other, and he started to curse again but bit it off.

The girl asked me, "You are sure he is not delirious?"

I told her gravely, "No, ma'm. He is not out of his head. That is the way the Arrowhead killers always talk."

She asked, blankly, "Arrowhead? But I don't understand."

I poked a thumb at Slim. "Slim here," I told her, "is the range boss of the Arrowhead."

Slim grinned and poked a thumb at me. "And Petey here is the chief hired killer of the Arrowhead—from New York."

The girl said: "But I do not understand. Cord and Spike both told me—"

Slim sat up, abruptly. He started to curse again and choked it. He looked at me. "Now I begin to get it," he said.

I told him, "I read somewhere about 'gleams of almost human intelligence.' "

Slim looked at the redhead. "Ruth Armstrong. R. Armstrong. You inherited the Rocking A and hired Cord to run it for you."

The girl nodded her head. "Of course."

"And Cord took you off the stage?"

She nodded again. "That was very nice of him."

"And there were two men who knew about it—Whiskers and the stage driver."

She looked blank. "Whiskers?"

"Yeah, Whiskers. He ran the Arrowhead Corral in Sacaton."

I thought again of Whiskers. Whiskers with his genial, unshaven face, asking me, "What'll it be, Petey?" And I could clearly see Whiskers sitting there at his desk with a hole in his head.

I listened to Slim. "Yeah, lady. Whiskers and the stage driver. And they are both dead now."

"Dead?"

Slim went on, patiently. "Yeah. Dead."

I was surprised at Slim's patience. I had never seen him patient. I remembered I had read somewhere, "For ye suffer fools gladly."

Slim was suffering a fool gladly. He even seemed to like it. He went over and over again about Cord, Whiskers, and the stage driver.

The girl said, "I don't believe you."

Slim looked at me in despair. "Petey, you know how to talk to the damn easterners. You talk."

"No use trying to talk to a Vermont school ma'm." I got up. "I'll get the horses."

I heard Slim pleading, "But Cord is stripping your range—selling off all your stuff down in Mexico."

I tipped my head to hear the girl say, "He wouldn't do that."

The horses were dragging their reins, filling their bellies on the wild-pea vine. I felt sorry for them, trying to eat with the cruel Spanish bits in their mouths. I slid up into the saddle and gathered up the reins of the other two. When I rode back Slim was sitting up, holding the redhead's hand, and talking earnestly. I said, "Hum-m."

Slim dropped the girl's hand as if it was hot. Probably it was.

I said, "That's no way to treat a lady."

Then I heard Slim actually pleading with the redhead. "But she will make you welcome—Gail Gordon will."

The girl pursed her Vermont lips primly. "I have heard all about her."

Her tone carried the vast, but envious, contempt of a "good" woman for "one of those."

I slammed up my horse and glared down at her. "Now

look," I told her. "You keep your Christian tongue off Gail Gordon."

She glared back at me. "So that's it?" She nodded her head. "That's what I heard."

Well, hell, what was the use of trying to argue? I told Slim, "If you can't climb on your horse, I can lift you."

"But I want her to go with us."

It was, to me, an astonishing Slim. Slim—range boss of the Arrowhead, a man known to be hard and ruthless, a man who had shot his way out of a half-dozen gun fights—Slim with a bloody rag around his head pleading with that damn fool redhead!

I climbed down off the horse and walked over to him. I tripped him and tried to take him in my arms to put him in the saddle. I whispered to him: "Now look. Cord won't hurt her. He can't afford to. Can't you see it, Slim? He can't afford to touch her, not yet."

Slim wobbled a little on his feet.

"Your head ache?"

Slim shook his head very gently. "Aches like hell."

"Now look. Can't you see it?" I looked around to see that the redhead was listening. "Can't you see?" I asked Slim. "Cord can't afford to hurt her until he has stripped the Rocking A."

A new thought came to me. I asked the redhead, "Did you give Cord a power of attorney?"

She looked blank for a minute. "Why, I don't know," she said. "I signed a lot of papers."

I spoke to Slim. "Can't you see, Slim? She has signed a power of attorney. That gives Cord the legal right to sell all the Rocking A stuff. Then he will sell the Rocking A ranch. And of course he picks up all the Arrowhead stuff he can. The redhead is safe enough—safe until Cord puts the ranch on sale."

The redhead glared at me. "Now I do know you are one of those Arrowhead killers."

I bowed to her. "Thanks."

The redhead asked me, rather anxiously, "You will look after him?"

I shook my head. "Sorry, lady. Soon as you are gone I shall cut his throat."

Slim laughed so much he had trouble getting on his horse. He said, "When you see me with my throat cut, you can tell Cord who done it."

The redhead got on her horse and rode away through the slim white quaking aspens. She looked back, and I thought she would wave to Slim; but she didn't.

I said: "My Gawd! 'No fool like an old fool.' "

Slim looked over his shoulder and told himself: "I ain't so old. Only twenty-four."

I broke out laughing. Then I took a look at Slim: Slim, with the bloody bandage around his yellow hair—twenty-four, and the range boss of the great Arrowhead outfit.

We slid away down the long slopes, out of the pines and then into the acrid smell of the junipers. We rattled rocks off a hillside, and the horses put their hind legs under them and slid down into a dry, sandy wash.

I asked, "Do you know where we are going?"

"Yeh."

The steps of the horses were muted in the sand of the dry wash. They climbed a steep bank into more junipers. Slim pulled up.

"Let off two shots, Petey. Count five between. Count slow."

"All right."

Slim slid off his horse into my arms, and I propped him against the huge, gnarled trunk of a juniper. "Count five, slow," he said.

I walked down to the edge of the dry, sandy wash and shot with my rifle. I started counting. When I had counted five, "slow," I shot again. I was astonished to hear

the echo. The echo of my two shots slammed down from the hills and seemed to be all tangled up together.

The sound of the two shots rolled along the sides of the Sacaton Range. I even thought that the last sound went away up the Great Peak of the range and then drifted away.

I went back to Slim. He was pushing at the bloody white bandage around his head. I took his hands down and told him, "Leave it alone."

Slim grinned at me. "You go down, Petey, and keep a look-see on the wash. But stay hid."

I nodded and slipped through the fantastic juniper forest to a place where I could watch the wash. A horse stuck his nose out of the brush across the wash—the nose of a horse that I knew. I wanted to yell, but thought better of it. The nose of the horse was yanked back into the brush.

I went back up and found Slim on his feet, rolling the cylinder of his six-shooter under his thumb. He asked, with a rather absent mind, "What was that you said, Petey? Power of what?"

"Power of attorney. The redhead must have signed such a paper. So Cord had legal authority to sell off the whole Rocking A."

Slim said "Hum" and went on rolling the cylinder of his six-shooter. Finally he said, "Now ain't that jest too bad?"

"Meaning what?"

Slim looked at me, and I had not realized that his warm blue eyes could be so cold. "Meaning I'm going to kill Mister Cord."

"Not," I told him, "unless you can beat me to it."

Dear Gawd knows how it happened. I had kept my ears cocked, and my eyes were always searching through the gnarled forest of junipers. It was simply not possible that a man could come in on us that way.

It was not possible, but Don Saturnino Gallegas Maria Voca y Sonaita was there with us making clucking noises in his throat.

Looking down, I saw that he had pulled off his spurred boots and was barefoot.

Don Saturnino was still making clucking noises, and I told him, "You sound like an old hen."

Saturnino was unwrapping the bloody bandage from Slim's head. I was glad to have him there. It seemed to me, all of a sudden, that everything would be all right, now he was there.

I watched his long slim fingers go around Slim's skull. Slim jerked his head and growled, "Damn you, Sat."

Saturnino sat back on his feet and looked at the fine cambric cloth in his hands. "A gunshot?"

I said, "No. Eros."

Saturnino flashed his white teeth up at me, "Eros?" he asked.

"Yes. Slim thinks he was shot with a gun. But is wasn't that: Cupid shot him with an arrow."

Slim looked at me blankly. "Cupid?"

I looked at Saturnino and nodded my head. "Yeah. Cupid. She's a redhead."

Suddenly Saturnino went into gales of laughter. He yelled, "But, Petey, Petey, you give me the laugh so I get my belly ache."

Slim asked sourly, "Well, what the hell?"

That put Saturnino into another gale of laughter.

Slim said, "Damn you kids."

Saturnino urged me, "But make the tell, Petey."

I told him all I knew: about riding up there into the aspen grove and finding Slim and the redhead.

"Hum. A redhead." Then he asked me, "You think she is the owner of the Rocking A?"

I nodded. "But she is a nice girl. Too bad."

I heard a stick break and got to my feet with my cocked

rifle in my hand. Saturnino spoke soothingly. "Let be, Petey. Let be. Our boys."

I looked up at a ring of hard-faced men. Lean, sun-blackened faces, the men of the Arrowhead. Then I began to laugh.

Saturnino asked, "What makes the joke?"

"That redhead. She said the Arrowhead hired a bunch of killers."

Garvey spat a long stream of tobacco juice that landed just short of my boots. He growled, "And how about you? You killed Panhandle, didn't you?"

"Now look, Garvey. Some day you will have your sights too high and you will overshoot. You will spit on my boots. And when that does happen I am going to knock your teeth clear out through the back of your head."

Garvey spat again, a bit closer.

Then Idaho was there. He slid off his horse and went quickly to Slim. "You all right, Slim?"

Slim said, "No. I ain't all right."

Idaho chuckled and turned to the rest of the men of the Arrowhead, asking, "You boys see anything?"

They all shook their heads. Idaho turned to Slim, "Who shot you?"

A man jerked his thumb at me. "Petey says it was a man named Cupid; but they ain't no Cupid working for the Rocking A."

Saturnino lay back on the ground and laughed until I was afraid he would have fits.

Slim got up on his hind legs and kicked Saturnino. Sat rolled over and went into another fit of laughing.

Old Idaho was pulling at his long white mustache with one hand. He was looking at me with a frosty look. He ordered, "Spill it, Bub. Spill it."

I told Idaho the whole story, about riding up into the aspens and finding Slim and the redhead. When I quoted the girl's, "those horrible hired killers of the Arrowhead,"

the men looked at one another, and they all began to laugh.

Idaho told me soberly, "They could be, Bub. They could be." He swept his cold eyes along the row of men. He said, "All right for today. We'll go back to the ranch."

We got Slim on a horse, and then Saturnino came toward me.

"No, you don't!" I told him, and dodged his whack on the back.

"But, Petey," he said, "I make the die laughing." He choked with laughter again and took time out to say, "And the Cupid does not work for the Rocking A!" That set him off again.

We rode away down the long slopes. I looked around at the men of the Arrowhead. They seemed to have been poured out of one mold. Wide shoulders, narrow hips, faces burned black with sun and wind of the desert.

A thin-lipped man nudged his horse up beside me. "You said his name was Cupid?"

I swallowed a laugh. "Yeah. Cupid."

The man said, judicially, "Well, it don't take but one to stop them."

"But you can't stop him with one."

"Is he that good?"

"Yeah. He's that good."

The man shook his head in disbelief and dropped back.

We rode on down through the acrid smell of the junipers. We came out on a flat with the stubby live oaks standing around. I was rather glad to see them. It has always seemed to me that the pines stand and watch you —just stand there watching you.

Then we topped the last rise, and I could see the glint of the river below the Arrowhead ranch house. I thought: Now I shall see her again. I shall see Gail Gordon.

The water leaped up at us as we went into the river, bright sparkles of sunlight that rose up in your face.

Idaho asked Footless, "Where's Gail?"

Footless looked blank for a minute. "Gail?" Then he said, "She took a ride."

The men looked at one another and then they crowded their horses up around Idaho. Idaho was leaning over his saddle horn, talking very quietly to Footless. "Took a ride?"

Footless jerked his thumb to the hill to the east. "Yeah. Said she was going out to meet you."

A man spluttered, "But, my Gawd, we jest come in over that trail!"

A tenseness ran through the men. I thought of Cord with his heavy eyelids, and of Spike and the new crew of bad men that Cord had hired for the Rocking A—and of the dead Al Meany, and Whiskers and the old stage driver. And a man had just shot Slim.

I remembered up in the aspen grove when I told the boys the girl had called the Arrowhead men "horrible hired killers" and how they had laughed. And Idaho had said, quite soberly, "They could be, Bub. They could be."

Looking at the men, I sensed what Idaho had meant. When somebody killed an Arrowhead man, or, worse, laid an unfriendly hand on Gail Gordon. I was scared and worried sick, and listened to Idaho's cool words, "Jest taking a ride, I reckon. Jest taking a ride."

That seemed to clear things up. The men eased their tension, but looked around as though they would like really to know.

Idaho said, "Go on to the cookhouse, Slim, and have Dolores fix up your head."

A man drawled, "Yeah, Slim, see if she can't do something for that head of yourn."

Somebody said, "Mebbeso old Dolores can find a spare one and tack it on."

There were some chuckles as we turned our horses toward the corrals to unsaddle; but there was very little of the usual talk, laughter, and horseplay. Walking up to the bunkhouse, we were all looking over our shoulders to where the trail to the east topped the steep hillside. When we saw we were all doing that, we all stopped.

Slim came down from the cookhouse, a white bandage showing under his hatbrim. Garvey spat. "Looks like the same damn head to me."

I asked Slim, "Does it ache?"

Slim grinned at me. "My, my! The top hand—of New York."

"Yes," I told him, "of New York. Two months out of New York—and what's it to you?"

Slim said, "My, my!" and spoke to Andy Jackson. "Andy, go run in that fresh string up in the pasture. And feed 'em."

Andy Jackson's spurs rattled as he clumped away toward the corrals. A man asked, "What we doing, Slim?"

"Nothing. Yet."

The men sat glumly around the bunkhouse. After a while a man asked, "Where's the needle and thread?" He stumped over, pulled a drawer out from the table, and took a spool of coarse black thread with a needle stuck through it. That seemed to start the rest. One man knocked the cartridges out of the cylinder of his six-shooter and began cleaning the gun. Another went over to the stack of rifles in the chimney corner, opened the breech of one, stuck in a piece of white paper, held the breech up to the window, and squinted with one eye down the barrel. Garvey sat by the fireplace chewing his cud like an old cow and spitting into the ashes.

Slim drawled, "You act like you was jumping the reservation."

Andy Jackson came in with his short, quick steps, went

over to his bed, lay down on his back, and went to sleep.

Somebody asked, "Don't that Andy never say nothing?"

Slim told him: "You ought to 'a' heard the time that old cow got loose from his rope and Andy had to take a run for his horse. My, my!"

Idaho called from outside, "Saturnino!" Sat went out, talked awhile, then came to the door and called two names. The two men got up as if on springs and went out quickly.

I wanted to go out, to look, to ask questions and see what was going on; but no one else paid any attention, so I sat back on the bed and tried to learn patience. Then I had a bright idea. I didn't work there. I'd been fired. I started out.

Slim asked, "Where you going?"

"Wash dishes for Footless."

"My, my! But a top hand don't have to wash dishes."

Garvey spat and growled, "Let him milk that damn cow in the corral." They seemed to think that was funny.

CHAPTER VIII

I stood on the ground in front of the bunkhouse and watched the shadows grow toward the cottonwood grove. The sun was low enough now to shine in through the whitish green of the tree trunks. I looked down through the rows of the cottonwoods and saw the long, black shadows all marching along in columns. I thought of old John G. Gordon, father of Gail, who had planted the cottonwood grove long ago. Sleeping now, under the white stone up on the knoll where the Arrowhead buried its dead.

And I thought of the young girl, Gail Gordon, on the one dusty street of Sacaton City, holding on to her father's gun hand while a man shot him to death—and how Gail Gordon had ridden away up the trail to the east and had not come back.

I said, "To hell with them," and started for the corrals.

The air was filled with the wild clangor of Footless beating on the wagon tire with an iron bar. He shouted, "Come and git it, or I throw it out."

I thought, I'd better eat first.

We washed in the tin basins under the shedlike roof at the back of the cookhouse. We twitched the roller towels and hunted for a dry place. The long table was half filled as men stumbled over the long benches. They began reaching for things—for great hunks of boiled beef, potatoes, and great spoonfuls of beans cooked with chili.

Footless was stumping around on his peg leg. "Coffee? Milk?"

I remembered the cow down in the corral bawling for her calf. In the two months I had been at the Arrowhead I had learned this was probably the only cow ranch in Arizona Territory where they had fresh milk and butter. And I had learned that the cowpunchers hated to milk a cow.

The men were eating hurriedly, nervously.

Old Idaho told them mildly: "Ain't no cause to wolf your food. She's been out afore, many times. Plenty times Gail done stayed out all night, made her own camp in the hills." After a minute, he added, "Ain't no cause to worry. Besides, Sat will find her."

A man growled, "Sat is good all right, but—" He left it there.

Then we heard horses and jingling spurs. All around the table, men stopped instantly and cocked their heads. I saw more than one forkful of beef held halfway to a man's mouth while he cocked his head to listen. Then we heard Gail Gordon's clear laugh.

"Go feed your face, Don Saturnino, and when I want help I'll ask for it," she said, and she laughed again.

Footless stumped around on his peg leg, grumbling: "What'd I tell you? She jest took a ride."

Don Saturnino stood in the door, swept off his huge hat, and bowed to old Idaho. "It is as the good Footless say. She just take the ride. Last week she find the little eggs in the quail nest. Today she take the ride to see do the little eggs make the little quail chickens."

I said, "Ain't nature wonderful?"

The men had sat back on the benches staring at Saturnino and listening and then looking at one another in relief.

Saturnino's dark eyes met mine, and he leaned back against the doorpost and began to laugh. Some of the other men laughed with him. Others looked sour as though ashamed they had been so worried.

I asked Sat, "And did the little eggs make the little chickens?"

"But yes." He shook his head sadly. "But I think the coyote get them soon."

Slim shook his bandaged head. "My, my, ain't that sad! But ain't the coyote got a right to live?"

Saturnino grinned at me. "But the Slim one, he has the heart—how you say it?—from the refrigerator."

I had been listening, expecting the shapeless Papago Indian woman, Dolores, to come in, pick up a tray, and go sniffing at Footless' pots and pans.

There were quick steps behind the door, and Gail Gordon came down the one step and walked along the row of men to her chair at the end of the long table. That was only the second time I had seen her eating in the cookhouse. Footless began piling a plate with food enough to last a healthy man two days.

Absent-mindedly, she said, "Thanks, Footless," and pushed it aside. She put her elbows on the table and built a castle with interlocked fingers to hold her firm chin. Her deep blue eyes looked black, black and brooding as they swept along the men of the Arrowhead. I thought I saw a sudden lift of pride, and then the brooding look came back

She looked at old Idaho at the other end of the long table. She asked, "You know what I think, Idaho?"

Idaho was pulling at his long white mustache, looking at Gail Gordon as an indulgent father might look at a willful child. "Yeah, Gail. Yeah. I know what you think. But we ain't having none."

The girl shook her head and went on talking more to herself than to us. "But we don't know," she said. "We don't know. She might be a good girl—a good girl in trouble."

Idaho was completely skeptical. "A good gal? Coming out to the Rocking A to meet Cord?"

I looked at Slim and saw a mean glint in his eyes. He told Idaho, "It could be."

Saturnino and I looked at each other and grinned.

Idaho shook his head and made a skeptical noise. The whole matter of the Rocking A girl was settled as far as he was concerned.

Then Gail Gordon spoke quietly. "I'm riding to the Rocking A tomorrow."

There was a burst of almost angry protest at that. Old Idaho shook his head. "Listen, Gail. Listen. I've put you across my knee and spanked you. And I can do it again."

The girl laughed gayly, "But that was a long time ago."

Idaho shook his head, "Not so long, Gail. Not so long."

A man broke in. "But see. Gail, ma'm, it ain't the gal. It's Cord and his killers is stripping the Rocking A and picking up all the Arrowhead stuff he can take along. That's what we got to figure on."

Gail Gordon asked him coolly, "You think a few cows are worth more than a girl?"

The man answered in apology, "Well, I wouldn't know about that."

Idaho looked a long time down the length of the table at old John G. Gordon's daughter. He shook his head as though escaping from cobwebs, or memories. After a long time he began giving orders.

He told two men, "You'll stay here at the ranch with Footless, Dolores, and Manuel." He told Saturnino, "You, Garvey, Andy Jackson, and Petey will go to Sacaton. Petey here will take over the Corral in place of Whiskers."

I spoke up promptly. "Not me. I wouldn't know how to run a livery barn. I would founder all the horses. And besides, I've been fired. I don't work for the Arrowhead now."

A man snarled, "Then who be you working for?"

"If you really must know, I'm working for Peter Stirling."

Slim grinned at me. "My, my! Mister Peter Stirling. The top hand."

"Quite. And of New York. Don't forget that."

Saturnino put in: "What is it, Petey, you have on the mind?"

Garvey growled, "Hell, he ain't got no mind."

Footless broke in, "Gail, ma'm! Gail, ma'm, you ain't eat no supper. I got some more all hot." He stamped around on his peg leg, whisked away the plate that Gail Gordon had pushed aside, and brought a new plate of food.

Gail Gordon's eyes swept again along the faces that were turned to her. She said, "That's all." She spoke to Idaho, "Fix it up."

Idaho started to protest again and then shrugged his shoulders. Saturnino laughed, The men made a racket as they got out from the benches. I waited for Slim.

And then, after all, it was Garvey and Andy Jackson who stayed at the ranch and I rode to Sacaton with Slim and Saturnino.

Gail Gordon had finally agreed to stay at the ranch until something could be found out. Found out, she insisted, not about the cows but about the Rocking A girl.

So Idaho switched his orders and told Slim and Saturnino to go to Sacaton City, see what they could find out there, and then take the lower road to the Rocking A.

"Can I have the job at the livery barn?" I asked Idaho.

"You ain't having nothing else."

It was twilight when Slim, Saturnino, and I rode past the white glimmer of the ranch house, and I looked at the dull yellow shine of a window. Gail Gordon was in there. I could clearly see her firm chin on her interlaced fingers propped up by her elbows on the table—see her in my heart.

The tunnel under the cottonwoods was already dark. Water murmured softly in the ditch beside the road. Water, I thought, water, that gives life to the cottonwoods and the alfalfa and the cows and the Arrowhead.

We came out of the dark tunnel and started up the long grade of the first ridge. I switched around in the saddle and looked back. There was still that dull yellow light in a window of the ranch house. Gail Gordon. And clearly in the still evening air I heard the snort and stamp of the saddling of horses down at the corrals.

I spoke softly. "And from battle, murder and from sudden death—"

Slim growled, "Me, I'd like it sudden."

It was dark when we topped the rise. Dark, with the glitter of the incredible number of stars of the high desert. I said, "We don't have so many stars back East."

Slim growled, "Ain't you got nothing a-tall back East?"

"Yes, we've got big bank buildings and private offices and desks where you sit all your life."

Saturnino laughed. "But, Petey, you make the sentimental."

Slim growled again. "I wouldn't know about that."

I dug my toes down into the tapaderas and was glad that I was alive and riding through the Arizona night with Don Saturnino and Slim. I heard Saturnino ask, "You know what I think, Slim?"

"No. And I don't give a damn."

"I think we have to kill the Cord person."

"Why the hell don't you?"

Slim was acting out of character. Without his usual good nature and bland grins, he was moody, silent, grouchy. I thought, His head aches.

I asked him, "Does your head hurt?"

"Don't talk so damn much!"

Suddenly I knew what was the matter with Slim. He

wanted to be let alone, he wanted to dream. Dream of a redheaded girl on her knees beside him in an aspen grove —a girl who spoke of "killers."

I laughed. In the dim starlight Saturnino's white teeth flashed at me. "What makes the amuse, Don Petey?"

I said, " 'Those horrible hired killers of the Arrowhead.' "

Saturnino laughed, and Slim growled. "Shut up."

A thin chill wind was setting down from the high peaks —not a wind, just a change of air that drifted down from the high places and sent icy fingers inside your sweaty shirt. I looked over my shoulder to the left and could see the jagged line of blackness where the Sacaton Range cut off the stars.

I sniffed the acrid smell of juniper, but it smelled different in the chill night air. Off to the south a coyote set up his sneering laughter. Then came the lonely cry of the desert whippoorwill: "Poor Will. Poor Will."

I looked again over my shoulder at the black line of the peaks. There was something different up there. I could not understand it and kept switched around in the saddle. My eyes were playing tricks. Instead of the jagged line of the peaks of the Sacaton Range there was a line of dead blackness higher up than the peaks. As I watched, it seemed to move upward.

I started to ask Saturnino about it. Then I saw a jagged line of light play along the edge of the blackness above the peaks. After a long time came the hollow roar of thunder. The thunder lasted a long time. It seemed to roll across the mountains and then come back, rolling up out of all the canyons and slamming against the hills, but died away at last in a low growl.

"So it does rain in this country."

Slim said: "And about time. She's a month late already."

Saturnino spoke to him. "Now we get the six weeks grass. We put a little meat on the beef bunch we turn off this fall."

"Yeah. But they don't hold it. It looks good to a buyer, though."

"So it does rain?"

Slim said, "I've seen water standing a foot deep on a steep hillside."

Saturnino laughed. "But yes, Don Petey, it make the rain—in July and August: rain here and there but perhaps not here at all; the very magnificent thunderstorms."

A blinding white light seared my eyes. For that split second everything stood out and filled my eyes, and for a long time in the after blackness I could still see Slim and Saturnino, the flicking uneasy ears of my horse, the dusty wheel-tracked road and a big-eyed jack rabbit looking at us from under a mesquite tree.

Then came the thunder. I had never heard thunder like that. It was like the country, strong, desolate, reckless, overpowering. It rolled along the mountains and seemed to explode against the hills as though it would crack them open and expose their innermost secrets.

After that it was indescribable, inconceivable. The blinding white light was always there, searing my eyes. The thunder rolled across the hills and seemed to explode under my horse.

There was a sound as though the great peaks had given a last, despairing sigh. And then the rain came.

It was not a rain. It was all the water in the world. We were at the bottom of a sea that rolled and heaved and shut out all life. The water ran down my neck and down my boots until they were filled. I gasped and shivered and let the horse turn his tail to it and try to hide his head between his knees.

The lightning flared, and there was a sharp explosion down to the left. The appalling thunder followed the

bolt of lightning, and I could feel my horse shivering in fright.

I gasped as though trying to fight up from some watery depth. Then, as suddenly as it had come, it was gone.

There was an appalling stillness where we were as the storm rolled away to the southwest, the lightning flashing and the thunder rolling away across the desert flats. The road was a running river, and the horses splashed around in it.

Don Saturnino was pouring water out of the rim of his huge sombrero. "What you think, Don Petey? Does it make the rain?"

I told him, "That was not a rain! Somebody pulled the plug out of the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean."

The great storm was going away off to the southwest, growing fainter and fainter in the distance. I looked back at Sacaton Range and saw the same jagged line of the peaks. Above that the stars were shining, remote, indifferent.

Slim was whacking his drenched hat against his chaps. He chuckled, seeming to have recovered his usual good humor. "We just got the tail end. The real rain come between us and Sacaton City."

"The real rain?"

He chuckled again. "That weren't nothing we got."

Saturnino said, "I think, Don Slim, the bridge go out at Sacaton City."

"More'n likely. But she'll be dry, time we get there. Let's get on with it."

Slim and Saturnino slid off their horses and were doing something. I couldn't see what. "What are you doing?"

Slim said, "Take off your chaps."

I slid off the horse, into a foot of water and mud, and got the slimy chaps off. Slim splashed over to me, took my chaps and hung them on the saddle horn.

"My, my! The top hand. Been to college and all that, and don't know nothing a-tall."

I answered angrily, "But I'm willing to learn."

I couldn't see Slim's bland grin, but it must have been there. He said, "That's why we put up with you."

Cold, wet, and miserable, we slogged through the mud and darkness.

Sat said, "You know what I think, Slim?"

"Oh, for Gawd's sake!"

"I think the bridge is no more."

I was soaked, and miserable. The road was a sea of sticky mud. "What a hell of a country!"

Slim growled, "You ain't seen nothing yet."

"Yeah. It is a desert one day, and the next day it is all water. Why the hell don't you arrange things the way things ought to be?"

Saturnino's white teeth shone in the starlight. "But, Don Petey," he said, "you ask the too much."

Then the smell of the wet sage stung my nostrils. I had seen the sage and thought nothing of it. Now that it was wet the smell stung my nostrils. Ah, me—the smell of wet sage!

Then I could see the ears of my horse. There was light in the world. I could see Saturnino's huge sombrero and see Slim's intent face.

Great streamers of light shot away up in the eastern sky, and then fadded away. The false dawn. It was black for a while, and more great streams of light shot away up into the sky. I could see things clearly now, see Saturnino and Slim, and see that we were down out of the hills. Off to the south a leprous white alkali flat had turned into a shallow lake.

The desert dawn came swiftly. The Great Peak of the Sacatones turned a rosy pink, and the sunlight crept down the gaunt slopes of the hills.

Saturnino said, "I think the bridge go out."

Slim grumbled, " 'Twon't be the first time."

Already the sandy flat had licked up the water, and the road was nearly dry. I was astonished to find that, except the insides of my boots, I was nearly dry myself.

The sun hit our backs and made them itch. It was hot. The land steamed, and the good smell of wet earth was in our nostrils.

Saturnino said, "But I think she run down by now so we make the cross."

"You are to make a look-see around Sacaton City and then take the lower road to the Rocking A. Where is that road?" I asked.

Slim told me: "Other end of town. Turn to the left. Runs around the foot of the hills."

"Then what?" I asked.

Slim shrugged.

But the bridge was still there. The planks were covered with sand already dry and waves of mesquite sticks and leaves. It rumbled and shook as our horses plodded across.

The drab buildings of Sacaton City, the Arrowhead Corral, the Arrowhead Trading Co., the New York Restaurant, the Palace Saloon, all looked washed and clean. We rode into the cool length of the big barn, slid off and unsaddled.

The door into the office was open, but I kept my eyes away from it—afraid I should still see Whiskers sitting there with his head down on the desk.

Slim yelled, "Hey," but nobody answered. Walking along the stalls, he looked at three horses and came back. "They been fed. Guess Fat looked after it." Then he grinned at me. "All right, Mister Peter Stirling. You're barn boss. Go to it."

"What are you going to do?"

"We're going to shassay around awhile. We'll go see Fat. After you get the horses fed, come up to the Chinese restaurant, and we'll eat."

"I'd like to go see Fat too."

Slim's face hardened. "You'll do what you're told."

I watched them walking away up the road. Already their spurred boots kicked up white dust. A bespectacled young man came out onto the loading platform in front of the Arrowhead Trading Co. and yelled: "Hey, Slim! I gotta see you before you go back." Slim waved, and they went on up the street.

I led the horses into their stalls and tied them up. I wished Idaho had not taken Stockings. But the sorrel was a good horse. I liked him. I got rolled barley from the back end of the barn and fed the horses. I noticed the stalls had not been cleaned out for a long time. I thought, Me and Hercules.

Back by the grain bin a ladder was nailed to the wall leading up through a hole into the haymow. I started up it and then remembered something. Climbing down, I went out the back door into the hot sunlight and looked into the water trough. The rifles were gone. I wondered who had taken them, and why.

Up in the haymow two round shafts of yellow sunlight came through knotholes and extended almost the length of the barn. With a pitchfork I began stuffing hay down the holes over the mangers. After that was finished I just stood looking at those two pencils of yellow sunlight. I stood there leaning on the pitchfork long enough to see that they had shifted a little.

I had just started for the ladder when I heard horses out front, and I stopped and listened. The horses came in, and a man grumbled something. Saddles creaked and spurs rattled as men dismounted. A man walked the length of the barn and back again.

"Ain't nobody here, Cord."

A heavy voice said: "All right. Tie 'em up, Spike, and feed them."

It was hot and dusty in the haymow, but I felt the icy fingers of fear crawl down my spine. Cord and Spike! And Spike was coming up into the mow after hay!

CHAPTER IX

I THOUGHT of a lot of things in the next few minutes. I heard Spike stumping around and cursing down below me. He went to the feed bin, and his spurs rattled as he came back. He cursed a horse, ordering it, "Stand over!" and kicking it.

I was frozen stiff with fright. I knew that, if I moved, dust would sift down through the cracks and my spurs would rattle. And now Spike would be coming up the ladder after hay. I rubbed my elbow against the butt of my six-shooter. Well, I had him there. I was determined that when Spike's head came up the hatch I would start shooting.

Then I almost laughed out loud. The "hatch." I wondered what they called the hole in the floor of a haymow. I could see the hatch of the sloop, see sister Jane with her feet braced and her hands on the spokes of the wheel. I could see Dad sitting up to windward smoking his pipe and hear old Paulson order Jane, "Ease 'er. Ease 'er. I could see the spokes slide through Jane's hands and see her brace herself as old Paulson ordered, "Hold 'er!"

I came back to Arizona Territory to hear Spike clumping along out front. With a great wave of relief I realized that Spike was not coming up after hay. I wondered whose life was saved.

I tiptoed up front, lifted a hook, and pushed open a door a few inches. Above me a couple of two-by-sixes, spiked

together, ran out over the door to hold a double block. A rope was rigged through the block and led inward so they could haul up hay.

I peered out of the gloom and up the street. Hours seemed to have passed since they came into the barn, but Cord and the two others were only fifty yards away. Cord still wore that red and white calfskin vest. Spike was hurrying along, kicking up the dust, trying to catch up. When I saw the way Spike's back ran straight up to the top of his head I was frightened again.

It seemed to me I ought to warn Slim and Saturnino. But I didn't know how to. I tried to console myself by thinking that Slim and Sat did not need warning. They could take care of themselves.

The bespectacled young man came out of the Arrowhead Trading Co. and shaded his eyes with his hand to look up the street. I opened the door a little more and waved to him, frantically. It seemed hours before he saw my beckoning hand. He climbed down off the loading platform and came across.

I jerked a thumb after Cord and his men, whispering hoarsely: "Go warn Slim. For Gawd's sake hurry!"

He looked up the street, then back at me, nodded, and started at a brisk walk. I could see that Cord and the two others had stopped and were waiting for Spike. They stood there a minute talking, and I pulled the door back until there was only a crack.

Now Spectacles was opposite to them, and they started on. Cord said something, and Spectacles answered, nodding back at them over his shoulder. I groaned when he went on past the Chinese restaurant. They must be eating there by now.

Spectacles hurried along, ducked under the hitch rail, and went into the Palace Saloon.

Cord and his three men also went to the Palace, walking slowly and evidently talking in low tones. Spike was

urging something, and Cord kept shaking his head. Just as they got to the Palace, Spectacles came out quite briskly, spoke to them again, and came on down the street.

As he came opposite the barn he looked back over his shoulder, then up at me, and nodded. I whispered, "Thanks," but he couldn't hear me.

I wondered what was going on up there in the Palace. Nothing, I concluded. Slim and Saturnino were warned, and also there was Fat, the barkeep, with his sawed-off shotgun: the sawed-off shotgun that was called "The Law in Sacaton City."

I climbed down the ladder, thinking I had better get on with the dirty work. But first I looked at our horses, and when they had finished eating I saddled all three of them.

The stalls hadn't been cleaned out for some time and it was a job loading the stuff into the wheelbarrow and trundling it out back. The sun rose higher; it was hot, and I was hungry. I wished I knew what was going on up in the Palace Saloon. I walked out front and looked up the street, but there was not a soul in sight. You would think Sacaton City had been abandoned.

I trundled another load out back, sat down on the edge of the water trough, and told myself, "To hell with the cow business!"

I began wondering if Gail Gordon really had stayed at the ranch, and what she was doing. I wished I was there now. And that girl Ruth Armstrong—R. Armstrong who had inherited the Rocking A and hired Cord to run it for her: I wondered how she had got hold of Cord. Perhaps a bank or a lawyer in Tucson. Dirty work somewhere.

Spurs rattled, and men came into the front of the barn. I got up from the water trough and then froze stiff as I heard Spike: "We got it to do, ain't we?"

I heard Cord's heavy voice. "You'll do it when I tell you. We need more time."

Spike grumbled, "Where the hell is that barn man?"

I pulled my six-shooter around and wondered what I would do with it against those four. But it was satisfying to have it. Anyway, I thought, they wouldn't dare do anything in Sacaton City. It was comforting to think this was Arrowhead country, and I told myself, "The Arrowhead looks after its own." That would be a lot of help to a dead man.

They were saddling up, grumbling and cursing, and then they rode on out front. I found I had been holding my breath and was wet with sweat.

I backed the saddled horse out of the stall, took the bridle off the saddle horn and slipped the bit into his mouth. I told him, "I need a drink."

Out in front I was worried when I saw all four of them sitting their horses out front of the blacksmith shop. One of them looked at me, and it was too late now. I couldn't go back into the barn.

The sorrel tossed his head and rolled the bit ring over his tongue. The man who had seen me said something in a low voice, and they all looked at me. I wanted to kick the sorrel into a run, but that wouldn't do. Anyway, I told myself, they can't do anything in Sacaton. And I was remembering Whiskers.

They shifted their horses around, casually. I saw Spike look at Cord, and Cord scowled. Then he shrugged and nodded his head a little.

Spike said, "If it ain't Mister Stirling." Somehow he made the "Mister" an insult. He asked, sneeringly, "Going somewhere, Mister Stirling?"

"Yes," I told him, "I'm going to see a man about a dog. A dog named Spike."

I wished I hadn't said that. Cold sweat ran down across my belly when I looked at Spike's slitted eyes.

The sorrel kept on at a walk, and before I knew what was going on the four men were all around me, two on

each side, all walking their horses along with me. Cord was a little ahead on the left, another a little behind Cord. One of the others was a little forward on the right and Spike was behind him. Out of the corner of my eye I could see the head of Spike's horse.

I looked up the empty street and wondered what had become of Slim and Saturnino. The dusty road ran straight ahead, past the drab buildings of Sacaton City, then up a rise to the sky line and out of sight.

The walking horses kicked up white dust that hung in the air. The sweat ran down into my eyes. I thought of the great rain and the road a sea of mud; and now it was dusty, and I prayed for Slim and Saturnino.

They can't do anything to me, I told myself. And I thought of the dead Whiskers and the wounded Footless and Slim. Not here in Sacaton City. But they had killed Whiskers in Sacaton City.

Their very silence was terrifying. Just plodding along at a walk, silent, grim, relentless. I realized that anyone who looked at us would think we were riding along in a friendly manner.

Frightened, I saw that we were passing the restaurant. Then on the other side would be the Palace Saloon. I begged that Slim and Saturnino would come out. Then, in my mind, I cursed them bitterly, lapping up their drinks while these men rode me out of town.

I stared miserably at the blank windows of the Palace Saloon on the right—empty and dead as a dead world.

A little beyond, something jabbed me under the right elbow and Spike hissed, "Raise your right elbow!"

Well, I raised it, and felt him tug the six-shooter out of the holster. Spike's six-shooter jabbed me again, just under the ribs on my right side. The man on my left, behind Cord, edged up and pulled the rifle out of the scabbard under my left leg. Then, with a swift yank, he grabbed the

reins from my left hand and threw them over the head of the sorrel.

About then I went amuck.

I reached over and grabbed the man with both hands in the back of his shirt collar, yanked him toward me, kicked the sorrel out from under me, and heard the grunt of the man as we landed in the dust of the road. I knew men were getting off their horses, and I heard Spike yell, urgently, "Turn him over! Turn him over!" And I knew I was fighting for my life.

There were men on foot circling around us, yelling, "Turn him over!" Frightened horses snorted, and my eyes and nose were choked with dust. I was sick from effort, and the smell of tobacco, whisky, sweat, and dust. I got a solid fist to his jaw, grabbed him by the hair, and slammed his head down against the road over and over.

The stinking man got his legs out and twisted me half over. I began to realize he was not really fighting, he was only trying to get his gun. He didn't know how to fight—all he knew was to get his hand on a gun. I tried to smother his hand and felt his thumb slide off the hammer and the gun go off. Then I knew somebody was kicking me in the right ribs, kicking brutally. Or was I shot? I didn't know.

With a wrench that made me gasp I got away from that and fastened my right fingers on a corrugated thing that I knew was his windpipe.,

Then he got his gun farther up and it went off again, and I sensed a man had yelled "Hey!" I yanked again at his gun hand and grabbed his windpipe with my whole hand. I tried to pull it clear out of his throat.

In a blinding glory of relief I felt him weaken and heard men yelling urgently: "Pull his hand away! Roll him over!"

His gun hand came up very slowly. It seemed hours before I could drag it up. I got my hand over his thumb on

the hammer and dragged up, dragged it up and over and felt him make a last despairing effort to pull back the hammer. The gun came on up and up until the muzzle was under his jaw. I shifted my hand a little to get a finger on the trigger. With a last effort he got his thumb on the hammer, pulled it back, and let his thumb slip off. He never knew he had shot himself.

I lay there and choked and gasped in the dust and horror and wondered when Spike would kill me.

I heard Slim's cool drawl, "That will be all, Spike!"

Spike snarled, "Yeah?"

Slim seemed amused as he answered, "Yeah."

Spike snarled at Cord, "Damn wonder you wouldn't 'a' helped one of your own men."

Cord spoke coldly, "I don't hire men that need help."

Then Saturnino had me by the arm and was pulling me to my feet. "But, Petey," he was saying, "do you have the hurt?"

I gulped, "Somebody kicked me."

Saturnino laughed. He spoke delightedly, "Make the lean on me, Don Petey, to get the breath back."

A man's spurs rattled as he came leading snorting horses. I got enough dust out of my eyes to see Cord still sitting there on his horse with the red and white calfskin vest open over a blue shirt. I heard his heavy, impassive voice saying: "Sorry, Slim, that this happened. It was none of my doing. I am satisfied if you are."

"Sure, Cord. I'm satisfied."

Saturnino snickered.

Cord went on, "No reason we should have any trouble, Slim."

"No, Cord," Slim drawled. "No reason we should have any trouble."

Slim's poise, his apparent indifference seemed to have Cord nonplused. He said, "Well, I got to get back to the ranch."

"Sure, Cord. You got to get back to the ranch." Then Slim's voice shot out keen and cold: "And when you get there watch yourself!"

"I don't get you, Slim."

But Slim was bland and drawling again. "I was jest telling you."

Cord's heavy face was set and grim as he looked down at Slim. After a little he spoke to his two men, "Come on."

Slim raised his voice a little. "Hey, Cord!"

Cord pulled up his horse and looked back.

"Forgot something, ain't you?"

Cord looked a question, and Slim touched the dead man with his toe. "Wouldn't mind burying your dead, would you, Cord?"

Cord's face hardened; then he spoke to Spike. "Bring him along."

"Huh?"

"You heard me."

Spike and the other man reined their horses around and came back, Spike uncoiling his rope. Spike told us, "Raise his feet."

Saturnino grinned at him, "I do not have the strength."

Spike glared venomously and muttered something under his breath. The other man got off, raised the dead man's feet, and put the loop of rope around them.

They went away then up the road in the hot sunshine, the dead man dragging along in the dust. He twisted over as though alive and trying to get up. I looked away and wanted to be sick.

Saturnino laughed. "I make the bet, Slim, I make the bet. One hundred pesos they leave him at the road fork."

Slim grinned. "Take the other end, and I'll bet."

We stood and watched the three men on horseback and the cloud of dust that hid the dead man. Out beyond town where the Rocking A road turned off they stopped

a minute. When they rode on they had left the man there in the middle of the road.

Slim's face was hard for an instant; then he turned to me with his bland grin. "My, my! Mister Stirling—of New York."

Saturnino was urging me toward the Palace Saloon. I said, "I need a drink." Saturnino laughed.

The fat barkeep was behind the bar, his arms spread with his white hands on the bar. He gave me a quick look, then got a bottle, poured out the whisky, and handed it to me. "Sink it, Peter. Sink it."

I sank it and shivered, and wondered if it was going to stay down. Fat poured another and handed it to me. "This," he said, "will keep that one down."

Slim was talking to Fat. "Tell Torres to get his burro and a rope. There is a dead man up at the forks in the road."

Fat's handlebar mustache lifted in a laugh. "I had a notion they would ditch him when they got beyond reach of a six-shooter." He laughed again. "I have to give Torres an extra dollar every time he has to dig a grave up on Boot Hill." He went to the back door and yelled, "Torres!"

An elderly Mexican came to the door, listened, grinned, nodded his head, and went away.

Saturnino said, "You know what I think, Slim?"

"And I don't give a damn."

"I think before we have the finish the good Torres have the great wealth."

Fat nodded seriously. "You got something there, Saturnino."

I was staring at a man's face in the mirror behind the bar. A man hatless, with hair apparently half pulled out and his face covered with blood and dirt. I exclaimed, "Good Gawd!"

Saturnino looked at me in quick concern, then looked in the mirror, back at me, and burst out laughing.

I said, "I don't see anything funny."

Then Slim began to laugh. "Yeah. Mister Peter Stirling —of New York."

I told him, "You go to hell."

Fat said, "Come back, Peter, and wash up."

I went out back and washed in a tin washbasin and suddenly discovered I was hungry. When I came back Slim said: "I'm all ganted up. What about some breakfast?"

I was astonished. "Breakfast! What time is it?"

Fat pulled out a huge silver hunting-case watch, snapped it open, squinted at it, and told us, "Nine o'clock, exact."

"I thought it was tomorrow afternoon by now."

Slim said, "Let's feed our faces."

I could never get used to the way the hot sun hit you like a blow when you stepped out into it. It was not merely the heat, it was a direct blow.

The sorrel had dragged the reins up to the hitch rail and stood there with one hip dropped and his tail switching flies. Saturnino walked out into the road, picked up my hat, and slapped it against his chaps. "Do not go in the sun without the hat, Don Petey. It is not good for the brain."

Slim asked, "The what?" Then: "What you s'pose would happen if Petey here got real mad at somebody?"

I said, "Forget it."

Saturnino asked, "That Rocking A man—you know his name, Slim?"

"Nary. Ask Petey."

I shook my head.

Slim grinned. "My, my! And you weren't never properly introduced?"

I was getting peeved. But then I realized they were trying to cheer me up.

We clattered into the restaurant, and again I wondered

why a Chinaman from Canton should call it the New York Restaurant in Arizona Territory.

The red and white tablecloth had only a few rings where things had spilled and run down the sides of the dishes. The caster in the middle of the table held the same bottles of vinegar, mustard, salt, pepper, and red pepper sauce. Saturnino gave it a twirl and said: "I make the bet which comes in front. You bet?"

Slim grinned at me. "Don't never bet with Sat. If you do, you lose."

Wong grinned at us from the kitchen door. "You want eat?" After a while he came back with beefsteak, fried potatoes, canned tomatoes, biscuits, coffee, sugar, and canned milk. He beamed at us. "Butter no got. Tucson no got. No good. Why you don't bring butter from ranch?"

Slim asked: "How would we carry it in this sun? In our hats?"

Wong grinned, whisked at the flies with his apron, and went back into the kitchen.

We were hungry and busy for a while. Then Saturnino took a toothpick out of a whisky glass, put his elbows on the table, and asked, "You know what I think, Slim?"

Slim grunted and wiped up a little lake of blood and fat with the last of the biscuits. With his mouth full of that he said, "Yeah, I know."

I looked at Saturnino, his coal-black hair, the pointed black mustache, and the large, dark eyes fastened on Slim. He said, "I think, Don Slim, this is the way it is."

Slim pushed his chair back a little, put one leg over the other, belched, and started rolling a brown paper cigarette. When he pulled the strings of the tobacco sack the whiteness of his teeth in his sun-blackened face was startling. "All right, Mister Don Saturnino Gallegas Maria Voca y Sonaita, get it off your mind."

But Don Saturnino was very much in earnest. "This is the way it is. The girl sign the papers, and Cord start to

sell out the Rocking A. Then the girl come out here to see her nice ranch. This Cord, then, he try to hide the girl. He have the good Whiskers and the stage driver to be killed."

Slim let the smoke slide out through his nostrils, looking at a blank wall with slitted eyes. "You're doing fine, Sat. Make some more talk."

Saturnino waved his hand impatiently. "But Petey here and Footless they make it, what you call it, the get wise."

Slim grinned. "Who? Them? Make the get wise?"

Saturnino went on earnestly. "Then you see the young lady person in the hills and they make the shoot at you; but we were all around there, and they have the worry and go away."

Suddenly I began to laugh. They both looked at me, Saturnino with inquiry in his eyes and Slim suspiciously. I knew Slim was thinking of the girl, and I laughed still more. Slim asked sourly, "What's so damn funny?"

I said, " 'Those horrible hired Arrowhead killers.' "

Slim and Saturnino looked at each other, and then they began to laugh. But I remembered the ice in old Idaho's eyes when he said, "They could be, Bub. They could be."

Then Saturnino went on. "But that did not make, what you call it, the pay-off, for Mister Cord. So now he make the big hurry. He strip the range very quick."

Something seemed to stick in Slim's throat for a minute, and I was astonished to see a blush upon his white forehead where the hat kept the sun away. He asked, "And what about the girl?"

Saturnino threw out his hands, "Mister Cord will make the think it is no good thing for him that the girl talk."

Slim got up suddenly. "You going to set here and talk all day?"

Saturnino asked, "You know what I think?"

"What?"

'I think we kill Cord."

CHAPTER X

I stood in front of the Arrowhead Corral barn while Slim and Saturnino rode up the dusty street to the south.

In the cool gloom of the barn they had slid up into their saddles with an effortless ease that I envied: when I mounted a horse I climbed on.

I had pleaded with Slim to let me go along, and offered all the arguments there were; but he shook his head.

"Idaho said you was to stay here, Petey. So you stay." He offered me a grain of hope over his shoulder as he rode away. "You can't tell, Petey. It might pop right here in town. Keep your eyes skinned."

As they went up the road, they swayed easily to their horses, turning at times when they talked. At the fork where Cord had left the dead man, they turned left on the Rocking A road.

Thinking of the dead man, with disgust, I wondered why they had singled me out that morning. Why not Slim and Saturnino? Then I remembered Spectacles had warned them. No doubt they did not care to take on Slim, Saturnino, and Fat when they were ready and waiting. Probably it was just a private war by Spike. I didn't like Spike. With a wry smile I concluded that Spike might not like me.

Spectacles came out the screen door of the Arrowhead Trading Co. and called, "Where's Slim?"

"Gone." I jerked a thumb up the road to the south.

"But I wanted to see him. When will he be back?"

I started to guess and then concluded not to yell out any

information, even if I didn't have any. "Right away," I told Spectacles. Him and his storekeeping troubles! I had troubles of my own.

Back in the barn I spoke to the sorrel and walked on down to three horses in adjoining stalls: a black, a roan, and a dappled gray, all with the Arrowhead brand. The dappled gray showed me the whites of his eyes and laid back his ears. I went up the ladder into the dust and cobwebs and poked hay down the chutes into the mangers.

I was sleepy and wanted to go to the office and take a nap on the cot there—the cot where Whiskers slept. "If you hang around here," I told myself, "you've got to come to it."

Then, faint and far off and infinitely sweet, came the tinkle of silvery bells. I thought of those two drinks of whisky on an empty morning stomach; but it couldn't be that.

Out front I looked to the north, to where the road from the ranch joined the Tucson road just beyond the bridge. A freight outfit was coming in. The man swung nine pairs of mules and two high freight wagons across the narrow plank bridge, and I wondered how he could do it.

They came on across the bridge and up the one dusty street of Sacaton City—eighteen mules and two wagons. Arching over the collars of the leaders were frames that held the bells. The bells tinkled and gleamed in the sunlight.

Suddenly I was horribly homesick for sleigh bells, for the squeak of iron runners on frozen snow and the chill of frosty nights.

A heavy bearded man rode one of the wheel horses. The only rein he had was one long line that ran through loops and was fastened, at last, to the bit of one of the leaders. A long whip hung around the back of his neck. The brake pole stood up high, and a rope from that was hung by a loop on his saddle horn. A jerk-line outfit, I told myself.

And that, too, I knew belonged to the Arrowhead—to Gail Gordon.

The entire outfit was covered deep with white dust.

The outfit swerved toward the loading platform, the man yelled, "Hey!" and pulled sharply on the rope that led to the brake lever. The mules came to a halt, the bells sounded only occasionally as one of the leaders shook his head. The eighteen mules began whisking their tails after flies.

The driver set up a great bellowing that shattered the peaceful afternoon. "Hey, Four-Eyes!" he yelled. "Four-Eyes! Come and get it."

Spectacles came out of the screen door and blinked in the white-hot glare. He said, "So you made it?"

The freighter boomed: "You're damned right I made it, and I had to leave a team in Tucson. The lead wagon's all yourn. The trailer is for Fat. My Gawd, you drink a lot up here!"

Spectacles answered, rather primly, "You know I don't drink."

The booming voice went on. "Too bad. Too damn bad, Four-Eyes. Might make a man of you. Let's git her unloaded so I can go up and see Fat and take a little medicine for the dust in my gullet." The freighter looked over at the barn and began to yell: "Whiskers! Hey, Whiskers!"

It was, I gathered, up to the successor of Whiskers to help unload.

Spectacles said, "Whiskers ain't here no more."

That didn't seem to bother the freighter any. "Well, hell, whoever you got. Tell 'im come a-running."

I strolled across the road and asked Spectacles if I was supposed to help unload.

"If you will be so good."

The huge man's jaw dropped a little, and his dust-rimmed eyes opened. He stared at me, then spoke

mincingly. " 'If you will be so good'? Oh, Harriet! I feel faint."

I was getting peeved, but Spectacles broke in. "This is Mr. Peter Stirling."

The freighter looked down at me and began again in his mincing voice, "Mister—" Then he let out a bellow and yelled, "Peter Stirling! Peter Stirling! Last month you shot it out and killed Panhandle and you shot it out and killed Whitey!"

"Shut up."

Spectacles broke in. "And he killed one of Cord's men this morning."

"You are a liar," I told Spectacles. "The man shot himself."

With astonishing agility the huge man was out of the saddle, across the off mule and was, apparently, trying to twist my arm off. I finally got my hand away from him before it was ruined.

We went to work unloading, Spectacles with a bundle of papers and a pencil in his hands. "One case of boots," the freighter boomed. "Check," said Spectacles. "Two barrels sugar." "Check." And so it went on until I thought my arms had been dragged out by the roots.

We finished after a while, the freighter climbed back into the saddle, unloosened the brake, yelled "Hey," and pulled softly on the jerk line. The mules strung out and the bells began tinkling. As I followed them up the road I thought again of sleigh bells and a frosty night.

Up at the Palace Saloon it was the same thing over again. "One case seegars," the big voice boomed out. "Check." "One box eating tobacco." "Check." "One barrel whisky." "Check." And so on.

It seemed cool inside the Palace Saloon. The big freighter slid a high heel against the rail and boomed out, "How's the old lady?"

Fat slid a whisky bottle and glasses along the bar. "Fine," he beamed. "She's jest fine."

I knew they were talking about Gail Gordon. The freighter boomed again, "You tell her she can throw her shoes under my bed any time."

I was mad. And then I laughed. I was, after two months, getting used to the people. The freighter meant that as his highest compliment. I laughed again. No doubt he had told Gail Gordon herself. With a quick clutch at the heart I could see her eyes crinkle up and hear her laugh at the huge man.

I am an even six feet; but the freighter was at least two inches more and twice as wide, and I had an idea there was not an ounce of fat on him. I liked him.

He boomed out, "How's that ornery Slim?"

"Fine," Fat told him. "Jest fine. He was in here this morning."

"And how's Saturnino?"

"Fine," Fat repeated. "Jest fine."

"Me and Sat is alike as two peas. We could 'a' been twin brothers."

I gulped and snorted and strangled as the whisky went down the wrong way; but I saw that anvil of a hand coming to slap me on the back, and I dodged it.

The freighter had poured whisky after whisky down his throat, but it did not seem to have a particle of effect. Finally he said: "I gotta give them devils a chance to roll. And I got a couple of gals to doctor."

I looked at Fat, asking, "Gals?"

The freighter boomed again, "Yeah. Gals. On the shoulder."

I followed him out and was surprised to find the shadows from the west were halfway across the road. The day had gone quickly.

The freighter slid up into the saddle, picked up the jerk line, and without any apparent orders the eighteen

mules swung around in perfect unison and started with the empty wagons down toward the Arrowhead Corral.

While I stood on the plank platform in front of the Palace Saloon watching the astonishing sight of the man managing the outfit I heard a rattle and bang on the road from the ranch and looked up to see the buckskins and the buckboard, and Footless lashing out at the ponies with the end of the reins. The buckboard took the run on two wheels, and I tried, mentally, to put the other two back down on the road as they came across the bridge. Then I started to run.

The freight outfit had been pulled up, and the man was yelling delightedly. "I seen Footless go out that way but I ain't never seen him come in—" Then he yelled at me, "Open the gate."

I watched the running buckskins over my shoulder and pulled open the gate into the corral on the south side of the barn. I saw the freighter swing that long string of mules and the two wagons through the gate with only about a foot to spare on each side.

The buckskins had been pulled up in front of the barn, black with sweat. Their heads were down, and their ribs went in and out as they gasped for wind. I cursed Footless and told him that was no way to treat horses.

Footless gauped at me. "Hunh? Horses?" Then he yelled at me: "She's gone! I tell you she's gone! Where's Slim? Where in hell is Slim?"

He was half crazy with anxiety.

I spoke as soothingly as a wildly pumping heart would let me. "Take your time, Footless. Take your time."

The usual words of old Idaho seemed to calm him.

I told him again, "Take your time, Footless, and tell me."

He told me then. A note had come from that damn girl at the Rocking A, a note to Gail Gordon. No, Footless didn't know what was in the note.

"But where in hell?" I yelled at him. "You, Garvey, and Andy Jackson were at the ranch. Why did you let her go?"

Footless spoke defensively. "Garvey and Andy was cutting the alfalfa. It needed cutting—needed it bad. I went down to help 'em mowing away on the wagon. I can do that real good—"

"Sure you can." I told him, exasperated. "Then what?"

"Then we came up to the ranch, and Dolores said a letter came from the gal out at the Rocking A and Gail caught up that black mare of hern and rode off."

"Why in hell did Dolores let her go?"

Footless threw out his hands in a hopeless gesture. "How you gonna stop her?"

Well, that was true enough.

He went on, "When we came up, Dolores and Manuel was climbing horses to follow her."

I thought of Dolores, the shapeless Papago Indian woman who looked after Gail Gordon. And of her young son, Manuel, the slim, opaque-eyed Indian lad. They worshiped Gail Gordon. But what the hell good did that do now?

"Who brought the letter?" I asked Footless.

Footless shrugged. "I didn't see." Then he asked: "What'll we do now, Petey? Where is Slim? Slim ought to be here now."

"What about Garvey and Andy Jackson?"

"They ketched up fresh horses and went after Dolores and Manuel."

"So now there is nobody at the ranch?"

"Nary."

I tried to think it all over, but didn't have time to think. Gawd! Gail Gordon had gone to the Rocking A!

I snarled at Footless, "Put up your buckskins."

Footless brightened up. He seemed to be very much

relieved to have some one tell him what to do next. And I wished someone would tell me what to do next.

Spectacles came out and called across: "What's the matter? Any trouble?"

"No trouble. Go count your sacks." That was not necessary, and I was ashamed. "Tell you all about it later." He nodded, and the screen door slammed behind him. Up the street Fat came out in front of the Palace Saloon and looked down at us. I was astonished to see so many people in Sacaton City.

I told Footless again, "Put up the buckskins. Can you ride?"

Footless gauped at me. "Hunh? Ride?" Then he saw me looking at his wooden leg, stuck into the slot in the floor of the buckboard. "Oh, that! Sure I can ride. It is better nor a foot. I stick it down in the stirrup leather and they ain't no hoss can jar it loose." Then he asked, "What'll we do now, Petey?"

I said, "Put up the buckskins."

The voice of the freighter boomed from the office: "Hey! Where's that bottle of liniment I left here?"

Footless turned the half-dead ponies into the gloom of the barn, and I looked into the office, at the roll-top desk where Whiskers had died and at the cot of tumbled blankets where I had not cared to sleep and at the huge freighter who seemed to fill the little office full.

He started to bellow at me about the liniment, but I shouted him down—told him he had to climb a horse and follow Slim and Saturnino. He laughed and told me to take a "few more thinks."

I squared off in front of him and stuck a finger against the washboard of his belly. "Now look," I told him, "Gail Gordon has gone to the Rocking A. Can you get that through your dumb head? Gail Gordon has gone to the Rocking A."

His voice was curiously subdued. "Gail gone to the

Rocking A? Christ!" Then he asked, "What you want me to do, Petey?"

"Slim and Saturnino left here just before noon bound for the Rocking A. But they will take it easy because Cord, Spike, and another man are ahead of them. You get that?"

"Sure I got it."

"Then you climb a horse and catch up with Slim and Saturnino. You tell them Gail got a letter from that damn redhead girl at the Rocking A, and she has gone there. Garvey, Andy Jackson, Dolores, and Manuel are all on her trail, but they are way behind. You get that?"

"Where's old Idaho?"

I told him, patiently: "Idaho and all the rest of the boys left the ranch yesterday. They are checking up on the Arrowhead stuff that Cord is running off down into Mexico. They don't know about Gail."

"Christ!" He walked over to the corner of the office and picked up a rifle. He worked the lever and then began cursing.

I laughed. "I forgot about those. I put them in the water trough the other day. Seemed like a good idea then."

He yanked the lever back and forth, fumbled in a cupboard until he found a box of .44–.40 cartridges. He filled the magazine and spilled the rest into the pocket of his blue jeans. I noticed his six-shooter. It hung way down, and the lower end of the holster was tied around his leg. It was the biggest and longest six-shooter I had ever seen.

He lumbered out of the office, grumbling and cursing, and I followed him into the gloom of the barn. Footless was protesting:

"Hey, that gray is one of Saturnino's private string. Besides, ain't nobody but Sat can ride him."

The huge freighter had the dappled gray out of the stall and was bellowing at Footless, "Hold him, Footless. Grab his ears."

Footless grabbed his ears and held his head while the freighter slapped on a saddle. He said, "All right." The gray pulled his hind legs under him and got ready to lash out. The freighter led him out front, took hold of the check strap, pulled the head around, and slid up into the saddle. The gray stood straight up. When he came down the freighter let him have the full benefit of his weight. The pony bucked twice, and then got tired of the great weight in the saddle.

The freighter waved to me. "I got you, Petey."

Footless was nudging at my elbow. "Now what do we do?"

"We go back to the ranch. And we are in a hell of a hurry."

"Them two horses is fresh," Footless said. As we went along the stalls my sorrel turned his head and nickered; but I had ridden him down the night before. Footless was already untying the bay and the roan farther down. He said: "You ride the bay. He is plumb gentle."

I snarled at him, "I'll ride the roan."

The roan jumped wildly before I got his head up, and held onto it. It was good to have a fresh horse between my knees, a horse that wanted to go.

"We'll have to see Fat," I told Footless, "—tell him to send Torres down to feed my sorrel and the freight mules."

"Yeah. Let's go see Fat. I'm that thirsty it hurts."

"Why don't you try water?" I asked.

He looked at me in amazement. "Hunh? Water?"

Up in front of the Palace Saloon I yelled for Fat, and he came out. "What's on your mind, Peter?"

I told him, and saw his genial fat face go through a curious transformation to that of a cold, hard-faced killer.

"Don't you think that is the way?" I asked. "I sent the freighter after Slim and Sat. Footless and I will go to the ranch and then hunt Idaho. Do you think that is the way?"

Fat nodded his head, thoughtfully. "Yes, yes, that's the way, Peter. Big Enough will find Slim and Sat, and you find Idaho. Yes."

I said: "Give Footless a bottle. His tongue is hanging down his belly."

Fat brought out a bottle for Footless. As we swung our horses away I told him, "Have somebody feed the mules and my sorrel."

Fat nodded and then yelled, "Hey, Peter!"

I kicked the horse around and rode back. Fat put a hand on my knee, and I could feel the grip through my chaps. Looking up at me earnestly, he said, "You ain't been long in the country, Peter."

I snarled at him. "Yeah. Mister Peter Stirling—from New York. Go on and say it. And two months in the Territory of Arizona."

Fat spoke gently. "It ain't that, Peter. It's the horses. You have a reputation for being easy on horses." He faced me with his eyes as he went on. "We got lots of horses, but they ain't but one Gail Gordon—"

CHAPTER XI

I LOOKED back over my shoulder at Sacaton City. The shadows had crept clear across the road. The shadow from the Arrowhead Trading Co. was already halfway up the front of the barn of the Arrowhead Corral. The planks of the bridge rumbled under us, and we turned right into the Arrowhead road.

The road swung into the mesquite and catclaw forest, not much higher than your head on horseback. We came out of that up onto a low ridge. I hitched around in the saddle and looked at the setting sun.

Away off to the west, across the valley of the Sacaton, across the desert, a blood-red sun was going down behind the Faraway Hills—just a point of intense red light above a black rim. Then, suddenly, it was gone. I told Footless, "Let's travel."

The ponies were fresh and willing to go. They knew they were going home—going home.

Again I saw my father with his hands under his coattails, backed up against the smoldering coal fire under the Florentine mantel in the bank in New York. I could see him looking up at the oil portrait of Grandfather Peter Stirling and saying, "You favor him, Peter," and I could see those two tables, shoved together, with my chair on this side. A great rush of love came to me for my father, for I knew I would never sit in that chair.

Sit in that chair and rot. I had seen the wild places, I had looked up to the Great Peak of the Sacaton Range, I had ridden with Slim and Don Saturnino Gallegas Maria

Voca y Sonaita, and I had known old Idaho, and Fat and Andy Jackson and Garvey. The slim Indian lad, Manuel, had let his opaque Indian eyes warm at my coming.

They were up the Maine coast now—Dad sitting up to windward, smoking his everlasting long black cigar, completely happy while sister Jane spread her legs on the grating and let the spokes of the wheel slide through her hands as old Paulson told her, "Hold her." Jane, her hair flying in the wind and her eyes, with that rapt look, fastened on the sails.

I had no doubt at all what Dad and Jane would think of Gail Gordon.

Looking over my shoulder at a new moon, I remembered the night, only a month ago, when I had sat on the steps of the main house of the Arrowhead, in a flood of silvery moonlight. Did you ever see the light of a full moon on the high desert?

I grumbled at Footless, "For Christ's sake, let's ride."

I remembered that night on the steps of the ranch house of the Arrowhead. The full moon turned the still leaves of the cottonwoods to silver, and the red and white and pink of the hollyhocks were all one color. I took Gail Gordon's hand in mine. She drew it away, startled. Then she lifted her aquiline face in the moonlight, gave me a proud look, and gave back her hand. I carried it to my lips. Oh, Gail, Gail, Gail!

"For Christ's sake," I snarled at poor old Footless, "can't you get any speed out of that horse?"

"But, Petey, I'm waiting for you."

We rode on through the night. Then I became intolerably sleepy. I began to check up. This was the second night I had ridden without sleep. Two days and two nights without sleep. I told Footless:

"I'm sleepy."

"Hunh? Sleepy? Why not? Jest slump down in the saddle, Petey, and go to sleep."

"I'll fall off."

"Hunh? Fall off? Can't be did. If you pitch over one side, the horse will side-step and ketch you. Let's have a drink."

"Where is that bottle?"

Footless switched around in the saddle and began fumbling with the slicker tied on behind. He grumbled about it. Then: "Here you be."

I took a long drink of the raw whisky and felt a whole lot better.

I heard the bottle gurgle and yelled: "Say, save it! That's all we got."

"Yeah. I know." Footless wrapped the bottle in his slicker.

I said, "Let's travel."

I wrapped my hands around the saddle horn, slumped down in the saddle, relaxed, and went to sleep.

Then somebody was digging at my ribs. I thought it was Spike with a six-shooter, and I got in a backhanded slap at him. Footless was complaining, "Warn't no call to do that, Petey." I woke up.

I told Footless, "I'm sorry. I was dreaming. I dreamed Spike was sticking a gun under my ribs."

Footless chuckled. He whispered: "We're coming up the last rise. From the ridge we can see the Arrowhead."

I looked around in the darkness, trying to shake the sleep out of my eyes. The stars were still there, glittering in a blue velvet sky, remote, indifferent. There were so many of them.

Footless handed me the bottle. "That will wake you up."

It did. I swallowed and shivered and handed the bottle back.

"What do we do next, Petey?".

It was not right, I told myself. Oh, yes, Mister Peter Stirling. Two months out of New Haven, Connecticut—

two months in the Territory of Arizona—and now Footless was asking me, "What do we do next, Petey?"

"Will you please go to the everlasting hell?"

"That was what I was thinking. The everlasting hell. Was that what you said, Petey?"

"Oh, for Gawd's sake, can't you make that nag travel?"

Footless leaned over and grabbed the check strap of my horse. He whispered hoarsely, "But, Petey, you ain't waked up yet. We're coming up the last rise. From the top of the ridge we could see the Arrowhead."

"To hell with the Arrowhead." I asked, "I thought the Arrowhead looked after its own?"

Footless said, "I'll say she does."

"You're a damn fool." Then I put out my hand and patted him on the shoulder. "Sorry, Footless. I was talking out of turn. Sorry."

Footless chuckled. "You think Big Enough ketch up with Slim and Sat?"

"Big Enough?"

"Yes. Big Enough—the freighter."

I laughed then. What a perfect description—"Big Enough"! "Yes," I told Footless, "Big Enough will catch up with Slim and Sat."

I hoped so.

We pulled our panting horses to a stop on top of the ridge. We could hear the faint murmur of the river where it came out, full-born, from under the hills. Down to the left was the incredible green of the alfalfa field. But now we could see nothing—nothing but the stars. The glittering stars of the high desert, remote, indifferent.

Footless whispered, "I don't see no light."

I remembered that from the top of the hill you could see the yellow gleam from the window of the main ranch house of the Arrowhead—the house where Gail Gordon lived. There was no light now. Just a black gulf that seemed to swallow up the world.

"I don't like it, Petey." After a minute Footless whispered again, "I don't like it, Petey."

As we sat our horses on the ridge and waited and listened, the valley below seemed like a black gulf. There was a faint murmur from the river. Down there, to the left, was the alfalfa field that had looked so incredibly green in the sunlight. I wondered what it looked like now since Garvey, Andy Jackson, and Footless had cut it—and so had not noticed that Gail Gordon had ridden away alone. Stars glittered in a remote sky, and a wave of cool air came up from the black gulf below us.

"Come on," I whispered, and almost laughed at our whispering when metal horseshoes rang on rocks. It seemed like a great noise in the stillness as it was thrown back from the opposite hill, the echo magnifying the sound.

A desert whippoorwill began whimpering about "Poor Will," and a coyote raised a long drawn-out snarl of derision. At the foot of the grade the gravel and rocks gave way to soft dirt, and the hoofbeats of our ponies were muted. My horse tossed his head and snorted, and I yanked at him, frightened at the racket in an empty world.

The tunnel under the cottonwoods was black dark—dark and chilly—and I shivered. Out at the end of the black tunnel the white of the main house stood out in the darkness. The tall stalks of the hollyhocks in front of the house had the startling look of a row of watching men.

There was no light, no sound but the breathing of our horses. Footless whispered again, "I don't like it."

"Who does?"

I wished, intolerably, that Idaho or Slim or Hank or Andy Jackson, or even Garvey were there. I would have given a world to hear Saturnino's gay laughter. They would know what to do. Life had no right to put so much upon me. I realized more than ever that I knew nothing

about the country, or the people, except that they were utterly relentless.

My horse tossed his head and snorted impatiently. The bit rattled, and he began to paw the dust in impatience for the corral, water and feed. Footless whispered, "Ps-st."

I snarled, out loud: "Oh, for Gawd's sake! If there's anybody here, they've known about us for hours. Go on and get us something to eat."

Footless heaved a sigh and started scrambling down off the horse.

"Give me the reins," I told him. "I'll look after the horses. You get something to eat "

Footless spoke in a normal voice. "All right, Petey. All right."

The sound of our voices lifted the panic; then out of the corner of my eye I thought I saw a hollyhock move, and I whirled on it while the back of my neck crawled. The more I looked, the more those tall black stalks looked like men. So I cursed Footless aloud to reassure myself.

He stumped away toward the cook shack, throwing back over his shoulder, "All right, Petey. All right."

As I rode down to the corrals in the darkness, every post was a Rocking A man. I began to wish they were. Then I should know what to do. Life would be very simple then—just start shooting.

I watered and fed the horses and dragged my spurs back up to the bunkhouse. I pushed the doors open in a childish bravado of noise. It took a stinking sulphur match a long time to turn from blue to yellow. When, at last, the untrimmed wick of the lamp caught, I felt cold at the pit of my stomach and hated to look around; but there was nothing there, nothing but the beds with tumbled quilts and blankets.

Looking at my bed, I suddenly realized I hadn't slept for two nights and a day. If you sit down there, I told myself, you will go to sleep.

The yellow glow of the window in the cookhouse and the rattle of the dishes were welcome. Footless blinked at me as I came in. I wondered if I was as red-eyed as he.

"Don't it ever get light," I asked him, "in this Gawd-forsaken country?"

"Sure," Footless soothed. "Come morning, it will git light."

"Yes," I grumbled, "and then be hot as hell."

The room smelled of burning lard. Then came the sizzle of frying batter in the pan. "I figured," Footless mumbled, "some hot cakes would go good." He stumped over to the table and poured black coffee out of a huge tin pot. "Set up, Petey," he said. "Set up."

I climbed over a bench and burned my mouth with hot coffee.

Footless brought hot cakes and a pitcher of lick. In the chill night air it took the heavy molasses a long time to come dripping out of the spout. " 'Tain't very limber," he commented.

He sat down across from me and ate busily. After a while he wiped sticky lips on his sleeve, blinked at me, and asked again, hopefully, "What we gonna do now, Petey?"

How did I know? Should we start right away to hunt up Idaho and the men, or stay at the ranch? I didn't know. To stay at the ranch seemed like lying down, like doing nothing; but if we started to hunt for Idaho we might or might not find him, and in the meantime the Rocking A might take possession of the Arrowhead. I didn't know.

I took a tin lamp from a wall bracket, opened a door, went along a passage, and looked around the big living room. I felt a dim hope some one might have left a note. I almost wanted to cry when I saw a coat of Gail's thrown carelessly across a chair.

The other night came back to me—when we were all in there—and I could almost hear Hank's belligerent

voice as he said, "No, ma'am, I ain't taking my time. I'm taking a gun." But I found no note.

Back along the passage I opened a door at the right and looked into the bare little office. The roll top of the desk was down. I rolled it up with a clatter, but there was no note there.

In the kitchen Footless was washing up. "You find something, Petey?" he asked.

I shook my head and put the lamp back in the bracket.

Footless asked again his insistent question, "What do we do now, Petey?"

"Oh, for Gawd's sake!" Then I asked, "Can you stay awake?"

He brightened up. "Sure, Petey. I don't need no sleep."

I noticed the window over the sink was a gray square. Morning was coming. Morning and daylight and an empty world and Gail Gordon gone.

"I'll run in fresh horses," I told Footless.

It was broad daylight when we let the horses stop to drink in the river—daylight and chilly with the early morning chill of the high desert. The bright water gurgled around the legs of the horses.

Footless started in again. "Hey, Petey, what—"

I told him, "If you ask that again I'll sock you."

"Hunh? Me?"

At the top of the eastern ridge we met the hot sun face to face. It was impossible to see anything to the east under the sun. I squinted into it and realized how the men here got those creases running out from their eyes.

We shook the horses and traveled on to the eastward across the gaunt ribs of the mountains—up and down rocky slopes and across the sand of dry washes. The junipers came down to meet us and the scrawny pines in the washes as though coming down to spy out the land but finding it too dry.

The blazing sun rose higher; now we could see things

to the eastward, and looked and watched. We could look down into the valley where I had found Al Meany dead. The buzzards were gone, and the place was empty and desolate. It seemed years and years since I had seen that black and white checked shirt lying in the gray sage.

As we were climbing to the top of the last ridge before Bull Spring I heard the low murmur of cattle and the rolling of rocks. I pulled the rifle out of the scabbard and carried it across the saddle. Footless muttered: "Must be ourn. They're a-coming this way."

A bunch of cows and steers were climbing the slope toward us, and we pulled aside to let them go past. They were Arrowhead stuff. Some of them stopped to look at us. I tried to count them and gave it up, asking, "How many?"

"Around a hundred," Footless said. "They ain't being drove."

"How do you know?"

"Hunh? Well, look at 'em."

I looked, but it didn't mean anything to me.

Then a man came out of the dugout over on the other slope and looked across at us. He turned his head and said something; another man came out, and they both stood looking at us. Then one yelled, "Hey, Footless, you got ary thing to eat?"

It was astonishing how their voices carried. Footless yelled back and then said, "Le's go."

We watered at the spring and angled up the slope to the dugout, where two of the Arrowhead men stood grinning at us. I asked, "Where's Gail Gordon?"

The man shoved his chin out over his shoulder. "Over there."

"She all right?"

"Yeah." He laughed. "But madder'n hell. You got ary thing to eat, Footless?"

"Hunh? Me? Eat?" Footless shook his head.

I got in, impatiently: "To hell with the eats! What is Gail Gordon mad about? She is all right, is she?"

The man laughed. "Well, Idaho ordered her to go back to the ranch, and she was mad about that. Then she told Dolores to go on back, and Dolores wouldn't go; and she was mad about that." He laughed again.

"Where are they? What's going on?"

The man jerked his outthrust chin over his shoulder. "Over on the Rocking A roundup flats." Then he spoke seriously. "We're a-combing the Rocking A drive for Arrowhead stuff."

Footless asked, "Hunh? Ary trouble yet?"

"Not yet."

I asked, "Is Cord there?"

The man shook his head. "They is expecting him right soon. They ain't dast start nothing till he gits there." Then he returned to Footless. "Idaho said for you to fix us up two pack loads of eats. We're camping here at the dugout. We'll go back with you now and git it."

"Hunh? Back? Me? But I don't want to go back."

"Them is Idaho's orders."

I kicked up my horse. It would be a good idea to get out of there before I heard any orders about myself. I said, "So long," and rode off.

The man yelled something at me, I couldn't hear what. Footless yelled, but I waved and kicked my horse into a lope.

Across several ridges, riding eastward, and I was in new country. This was beyond where I had been when riding line and living at the Bull Spring dugout. The trail was wide and old but not much traveled lately. Slim had said that the Arrowhead and Rocking A were, in the old days, "like blood brothers"; but that was before the Armstrong girl had inherited it and hired Cord to run the ranch for her—or, as we all knew, to ruin

it for her. And she was probably the only person in the world who did not know that. I said out loud, "Damn fool girl!"

Topping a rise, the pony flicked his sharp ears straight forward. The roundup flat of the Rocking A was just below us, and on it was a herd of cattle. They were quiet; some were lying down, others were standing around as if waiting for something.

Around them were mounted men sitting idly on their horses. I wondered how many there were in the herd. More than I had ever seen at one look.

This side of the herd, a little way up the slope a group of people were sitting on their horses. With a great leap of my heart I recognized old Idaho. And three women: the Armstrong girl, I thought, and Dolores—and Gail Gordon.

As I rode down, both Idaho and his blaze-faced horse Stockings turned to look at me. I expected Idaho to ask, "What's on your mind, Bub? What's on your mind?" but he gave me a frosty glare and turned back to the men.

Gail Gordon gave me a quick smile, and everything seemed all right with the world.

The Armstrong girl looked as if she wanted to ask me a question, then flushed and looked away. Divided skirts, I thought. All very nice and modest. I looked at Gail Gordon's long legs in the blue-jean overalls and the incredibly small boots.

Garvey, with his reddish beard still a half-inch long, spat contemptuously. I started to say something and then stopped to hear Idaho's rumbling voice as he spoke to the man facing him.

"Think so, do you? Think so?"

The man was snarling, "No, sir, you ain't combing no Rocking A herd. Not nobody. Leastways, not till Cord gits here."

I looked around. Down to the left were a bunch of men. I recognized Hank and Andy Jackson and the other Arrowhead men. A few were sitting on the ground, holding the reins of their horses. Some were in their saddles looking up at old Idaho.

I remembered Lexington: "If they want a war, let it start right here." I shivered in the hot sun, feeling the tension in the air, the taut muscles, the expectant waiting for something to happen.

The man facing Idaho hung his head on his shoulder and spoke with obvious relief. "Here comes Cord."

CHAPTER XII

Cord and two others had come up over the rise beyond the herd. One of them was Spike. I wondered why Spike scared me more than the others. It must have been because he neither looked nor seemed like a human being. He was a wild beast. You couldn't reason with him, talk him out of anything. When it came to the showdown he would have to be killed.

As Cord, Spike, and the other man came at a walk down the other slope I remembered that formerly it had always been Cord, Spike, and two others—those four always together. Now there were three. I wondered if Torres had yet buried the fourth on Boot Hill up back of Sacaton City.

The Rocking A man who had been talking to Idaho rode around the south end of the herd to meet Spike. I looked around, furtively, at the Arrowhead men. Then I remembered they did not yet know about that man Torres was burying on Boot Hill. For some reason or other I was glad of that.

Idaho asked, "Where's Slim and Sat?"

"They took the wagon road to the Rocking A," I told him.

Then I told him about Footless driving into town with the tale that Gail Gordon had gone to the Rocking A and Garvey, Andy Jackson, Dolores, and her son Manuel had all gone after her.

Idaho smiled a little and pulled at his long white

mustache. "We know about that, Bub. We know about that."

I told him about the huge freighter and my sending him after Slim and Sat while Footless and I came back to the ranch. I ended up with, "And I'm not going to run your damn Arrowhead Corral any more."

Idaho laughed, and we both turned to listen to Gail Gordon talking to the Armstrong girl.

"But can't you see?" she was pleading. "Can't you see? Cord is stripping the Rocking A and driving everything down into Mexico. Can't you see that?"

Ruth Armstrong protested: "I am sure you are mistaken. Mr. Cord would not think of doing such a thing. He had the very highest recommendations." There was an abstracted note in her smooth voice, "Besides, Mr. Cord has explained the whole thing to me. He is selling off the old stuff. He says they should have been sold off before. He says—"

Gail Gordon made a hopeless gesture with her hands and broke in, "Oh, for Gawd's sake!" There was exasperation in her voice. "Can't you see? Look at that herd. For Gawd's sake look at it. It is full of yearlings and two-year-olds!"

"But Mr. Cord explained that in gathering they had to take everything, then they would turn the young stuff loose and they would go back to their range. I know," she said, "I don't know anything about it; but it seems very clear the way Mr. Cord explains it."

Gail Gordon spoke to me, sharply, "Peter. Peter Stirling. Come here."

I moved my horse over and was afraid to look at her because, if I met her clear eyes, I would again be a blithering idiot. I heard horses coming down the slope behind us and listened to them and to Gail Gordon.

"You talk her language, Peter. Tell her about things. Make her understand."

"Now look," I told the Armstrong girl. "You are not in Vermont or in Boston. You are in Arizona Territory. You can't call the cop on the corner."

As I talked I looked at her and realized that she was extremely good-looking, in spite of her red hair and gray-green eyes.

"We, the Arrowhead"—I thrilled at my own words—"we, the Arrowhead are the only friends you have got in this country. For Gawd's sake believe me."

The girl looked at me, level-eyed, shaking her head obstinately. "I am sure," she said, "that you mean well; but you are mistaken. Mr. Cord says—"

I heard a snicker behind me and Slim's cool drawl: "My, my! Mister Cord says."

The girl flushed and looked over her shoulder. She smiled and spoke. "I am glad to see that you are all right, Mr. Slim."

I took a swift look at Slim and at the smiling eyes of Saturnino. I felt good now. Here were Idaho, Slim, and Sat, and now everything would be all right.

Slim looked at the girl and told her in his slow drawl, "Cord is a thief and a liar and a murderer."

The girl flushed and demanded angrily, "How dare you?"

Slim jerked his head at me, "Yesterday they tried to kill Petey in Sacaton City. Ask him."

The girl's eyes widened and looked distressed. She started to say something, and I heard Hank laugh. I looked at Hank's wide hatbrim flipped straight up over a big nose and graying hair. Hank was quite happy, quite in his element. He grinned, asking, "Did they kill you?"

Idaho broke in, curtly. "Go on back to the ranch, Gail. Go on back to the ranch—you and Dolores. We'll look after this."

I thought I saw tears in Gail Gordon's eyes. "But we

can't leave it this way, Idaho. We can't." She turned to the Rocking A girl. "Won't you come to the Arrowhead with me? Come and stay a few days. I beg you."

I heard somebody mutter: "Aw, hell! Let's git on with it."

Ruth Armstrong spoke. "That is nice of you, Miss Gordon, but I can't. Not really." Then she brightened up. "But why don't you come back to the Rocking A with me? I'd love to have you."

Idaho spoke curtly. "Gail! You go on back to the ranch."

Hank laughed. "Reckon we'll have to hog-tie her, Idaho. Will I git a rope on her?"

No one paid any attention to Hank as we listened to Saturnino. He was saying, "Ah, Mister Cord makes the visit."

As Cord rode up I kept my eyes away from Spike. Spike and that other man were close behind Cord, as always.

Cord lifted his heavy lids to look at Idaho, and put on his hearty manner. "Howdy, Idaho. Howdy."

He took off his wide-brimmed hat and bowed to Gail Gordon. "How are you, Gail?" he asked.

He put his hat on and looked at Idaho again. They both seemed quite amiable, on the surface. As amiable, I thought, as two wildcats watching for a chance to jump.

Cord, in his hearty way, said, "The boys tell me you think there's some Arrowhead stuff in the herd?"

Idaho told him, "We had that notion, Cord."

"Well, well! That is very easily fixed." He looked around, "You got a lot of your boys here. You help us, and we'll cut the Arrowhead stuff."

Slim spoke softly. "Yeah, Cord, we got a lot of our boys here."

Cord paid no attention to that. He pulled a gold watch out of the red and white calfskin vest. "Hum. Plenty of time."

Everybody else looked up at the sun. Slim drawled, "Yeah, plenty of time."

Cord said, "Most of my boys are out on another gather. You have your boys cut out the Arrowhead stuff, Idaho. I want to move the bunch down onto water before dark."

My eyes drifted, and inevitably came around to the snakelike glare of Spike. He just sat there and stared at me, stared from baleful eyes. I shivered. I was afraid. But I was damned if he could outstare me. "Where's your friend, Spike?" I taunted.

Cord spoke sharply. "Spike!"

Spike growled something and looked away.

I heard the Rocking A girl say, "Oh, Mr. Cord," and was appalled at the cheerful casualness of her tone. Good Gawd, I thought, can't she see?

She went on, lightly, casually, "I have invited Miss Gordon to come to the ranch and stay a few days."

Cord was very hearty. Very hearty, indeed. "Why, of course, Ruth. Of course. That's fine." He spoke to Gail Gordon. "We can make you very comfortable, Miss Gordon. Of course," he went on, "the Rocking A is not the Arrowhead. We have been too long without the woman touch. But we will make you very welcome."

Slim was cursing softly, but no one paid any attention to him.

Cord spoke briskly to Idaho. "Let's get started, Idaho. I want to start moving right away."

Idaho said, "Slim."

Slim seemed to gather up the men of the Arrowhead with his eyes. He rode slowly down toward the herd, his men going with him. I started to follow, but Idaho called,

"Bub!" I stopped and saw old Idaho grinning at me. "Not your stuff, Bub. Not your stuff."

Garvey rode past me, spat contemptuously, and said, "Takes a man, Bub, to do cutting work."

I told Garvey, very sweetly, "And will you be so good as to go to hell!" Garvey always got my goat.

Saturnino, riding past, gave me a slap on the back and a flash of his white teeth. "You make the watch, Bub! You learn."

I grinned back. "And you too can go to hell."

I grumbled at Idaho, "I've been working for an Arizona cow outfit for two months, and today is the first time I've seen any cows."

Old Idaho soothed me. "Takes time, Bub. Takes time. And besides your horse ain't no cutting horse."

"What," I asked, "is a cutting horse?"

"Watch."

I grumbled again, "And, besides, I'm sick of being called Bub."

Idaho spoke as if brushing off flies. "All right, Bub. All right."

Then I forgot Idaho, watching the boys working the herd. The critters were all on their feet now, seeming to know that something was going on that concerned them. Men were riding around the herd, riding slowly, talking softly, turning back into the bunch any that started to run out. There were very few that tried to break out. They liked their kind. They stuck together.

Andy Jackson rode into the close-packed herd, and I followed his hat. Then a young steer broke out of the herd with Andy Jackson on his heels. I didn't see how he did it. The steer trotted up the slope, and some Arrowhead men were waiting for him.

Then I saw Saturnino's huge hat come out of the herd chasing a young cow. That went on and on for an hour. Now there was quite a bunch of Arrowhead stuff up on

the slope, held there by our men. But I couldn't see how they did it. The Arrowhead men would disappear into the choking dust, into the milling herd, and soon a cow or a steer would come plunging out of the herd and go up to join the bunch on the hillside. Then the man would ride back down into the dust cloud.

"But how the hell do they do it?" I asked Idaho.

"Horses, Bub," he answered. "Horses.

"Horses?" I asked.

"Yeah, horses. You got a good cutting horse, you show him what you want, then all you do is sit there and ride."

Old Idaho chuckled as he finished talking. "And it takes some riding."

Cord was sitting his horse alongside old Idaho on Stockings. Spike and his friend were sitting on the ground, down to the left, holding the reins of their horses. Cord said: "Your boys are right good, Idaho. Never seen a herd worked so slick."

Idaho, with conscious pride, said, "They ain't so bad, Cord. They ain't so bad."

Slim rode out of the herd and the dust. He wiped his dirty face with his neck scarf and waved to Idaho.

Idaho told Cord: "We could cut all that young stuff for you. Save you a lot of trouble."

"Thanks, Idaho. I'll just shove them down onto water and do the cutting there."

"Suit yourself, Cord. Suit yourself. You making any more gathers?"

Cord pulled his horse up, "Why, yes," he said, "the boys are out on another gather now. Have them here day after tomorrow. But you don't need to bother, Idaho. I'll have the boys cut the Arrowhead stuff and throw it back on Arrowhead range. You know how it is, Idaho—us cowmen have to help each other."

Idaho said, "That's right, Cord, that's right."

Slim came riding up, mopping his face with his red neck

scarf. I suspected he had spit on the scarf to help wash the dust out of his eyes. I looked over at the Rocking A girl, and saw she was watching Slim.

Slim said, "About two hundred, Idaho."

Idaho nodded and told Slim, "Have some of the boys throw them beyond Bull Spring."

Slim rode off.

Then that dumb Rocking A girl was talking to me. "Gail has just told me that you are Peter Stirling—that you are *the* Peter Stirling. Why, I saw you row at New London only last June."

I said sourly, "I hope you lost all your money."

She laughed. "I did."

I looked at her sea-green eyes and began to like her. She could lose a bet and not get sore about it.

Last June! Good Gawd! And now it was early September and I had been working for the Arrowhead outfit for two months. Two months! Two thousand years.

I sat on my horse in the blazing Arizona sun and thought about it. I mopped my sweaty face with my red neck scarf and looked down at my chaps. The sweat was coming through the leather on the inside of the legs. My elbow pressed against the butt of my six-shooter, and the .44–.40 rifle made a bulk under my left leg. And she had seen me row at New London. That was about two and a half months ago. Two and a half thousand years ago.

Suddenly, I could see Dad in his den in the New York house—see him carefully lighting a long black cigar and looking up at the portrait of my mother. I could hear him saying, "She was a very great lady, Peter." And then that curious catch in his breath as he added, "She still is."

I could not remember her distinctly. The only memory I had was of a gracious presence. She died when sister Jane was born.

"Yeah," I told the Rocking A girl, "I am that Peter

Stirling. And what do you want to do about it? Will you believe now that Cord is a thief and a liar?"

She laughed—laughed merrily. "I think, Mr. Stirling, you do not know any more about this business than I do."

Gail Gordon said: "Idaho, I am going with Ruth Armstrong. I'll be over at the Rocking A for a few days."

I looked at old Idaho, at the blue veins on the back of his long-fingered hands. I expected him to say something. All he did was to shrug his powerful shoulders and say, "All right, Gail. All right."

I flared out at Idaho. "What the hell are you doing?"

Idaho pulled at his long white mustache. He muttered, "Take it easy, Bub. Take it easy."

"And will you please stop calling me Bub?"

He gave me a frosty grin. "All right, Bub. All right."

Cord rode up, he and his red and white calfskin vest. Spike and the other man were close behind. Cord spoke in his hearty, man-to-man talk. "All right, Idaho. The boys are shoving the herd down to water."

Idaho asked again, "Don't you want my boys to cut the young stuff?"

Cord waved his hand. I couldn't hear what he said.

I told old Idaho, "And you, Mister Idaho, are a damn fool."

Old Idaho gave me an indulgent grin. "Think so, Bub? Think so?"

I looked down the slope and saw that the Rocking A men had gathered up the herd and were starting it down the valley—down the valley to the south, toward Mexico.

Gail Gordon and Ruth Armstrong were riding around the upper end of the herd. Gail stopped and talked to the Papago Indian woman Dolores. She seemed mad about something, but Dolores merely looked at her from opaque eyes. Finally Gail gave up, and they rode on. I was glad to see Dolores following them.

I kicked up my horse and Idaho growled, "Where you going, Bub?"

I snarled over my shoulder, "The Arrowhead looks after its own, don't it? I'm going to the Rocking A. And to hell with you, and the Arrowhead!"

Idaho said something I didn't hear, and then a rope whistled. Before I could raise my arms or dodge, a rawhide rope settled down over my head, down around my elbows and was yanked taut. I knew where the rawhide rope came from.

I began cursing and struggling. "Damn you, Sat, I'll cut your rope in ten pieces."

Saturnino was coiling up the rope, walking it down to me, keeping it tight around my arms. He laughed. "Do I make the hog-tie, Idaho?" He flashed his white teeth at me. "But, Petey, do not make the cut. To cut the rope is the great insult. My grandmamma not make the forgive me if somebody cut the nice rope."

"You and your grandmamma! Damn you, turn me loose."

Saturnino laughed, "You make the promise, Petey? You make the promise to not go to the Rocking A?"

I thought that over. "All right, I promise—until sunset."

Saturnino flipped his hand, and the rawhide rope rose over my head. I couldn't see how he did it. He said, "At sunset I make the hog-tie."

The men of the Arrowhead were grouped around old Idaho: lean, sun-blackened men—lean and hard and cold, and altogether willing to kill at the nod of old Idaho's white head.

I remembered what the Armstrong girl had said about "those horrible hired Arrowhead killers" and Idaho's curt comment: "They could be, Bub. They could be."

Hank rode up with his hatbrim flipped straight up over his dusty, dirty face. He laughed gleefully, talking to

Idaho. "My Gawd, old dry-belt, we ketched Cord with his pants down that time! How about giving them a run-around, old dry-belt?"

Idaho shook his head. "Not yet."

Hank's remark put the idea into my head. It seemed a quite bright idea. I looked around. Andy Jackson and three more men of the Arrowhead were shoving the Arrowhead stuff up the trail toward Bull Spring. I wondered, idly, if the men were back there yet with two pack loads of food. That thought made me hungry.

Slim and Saturnino were on my right and left, looking down at the Rocking A herd. Beyond the herd I could see Gail Gordon and the Rocking A girl riding close together. They seemed to be talking earnestly. Dolores was just behind them. Cord, Spike, and the other men were sitting their horses just below us, watching the herd making a slow start. There were five Rocking A men strung out along the slowly moving cattle. A lazy cloud of dust came up from the hundreds of hooves.

The bright idea seemed brighter than ever. A lean, hard-bitten man rode down from the group around Idaho and asked me:

"Hey, Petey! That Cupid man we was talking about: is that side-kick of Spike's the Cupid man?"

Saturnino and I looked at each other and began to laugh.

Slim growled, "All right, Mister Don Saturnino Gallegas Maria Voca y Sonaita, laugh your fool head off."

That started us off again. I gurgled to the man, "Yeah, that's Cupid."

The man nodded his head, seriously. "I figured it that-a-way." He rode back to Idaho.

I looked up to the group around old Idaho and began to laugh again.

Saturnino asked, "What makes the amuse, Petey?"

"I saw a painting once," I told him, and waved my

hand at the group up the slope, " 'Napoleon and His Marshals.' "

Sat laughed, delightedly. "But yes, Petey. It is the same thing."

Slim growled, "You kids make me sick."

The bright idea seemed brighter than ever. I casually started my horse at a walk up the slope. I wanted to get beyond reach of Saturnino's deadly rawhide rope. When I thought I was safe I whirled the pony, spurred him savagely, and started down the slope.

The horse was mad. We went down the slope in buck jumps. I headed him into the Rocking A herd, pulled off my hat, and waved it and yelled and yelled.

On that maddened, buck-jumping horse, yelling and waving my hat, I drove into the Rocking A herd.

CHAPTER XIII

My nostrils were filled with the sting of dust and cow smell. My horse bucked into a knot of cows and bucked out. Then, suddenly, I realized that I was alone. I heard two shots and wondered who was shooting at who. I laughed and corrected my English: who was shooting at whom. I felt good.

I could hear the rumble of the herd running, running hard and fast. I heard the hoofbeats of running horses and men swearing. The dust settled on my hat and shoulders. and I drew it up my nose and coughed. I leaned forward and patted the sweating shoulders of the horse. I apologized to him. He snorted and tossed his head as if he wanted more of it. I eased him out of the dust cloud.

Well, I thought, I might as well go up and take my medicine. I could imagine what Idaho was going to say to me. I rode out of the dust cloud and looked up at Napoleon and his Marshals. I rode on up.

Cord was there when I arrived: Cord with Spike and Cupid behind him. I looked at the Arrowhead men. To my enormous relief, and delight, they were grinning at me.

Cord's heavy face was purple with anger. He was saying, "By God, Idaho, that was a hell of a thing to do."

I could see that Idaho was struggling with a grin. I felt fine. Idaho spoke with his soothing voice. "Too bad, Cord. Too bad."

Idaho went on: "I'm right sorry, Cord. Right sorry. But you know how 'tis." He jerked a thumb at me. "The

damn fool tenderfoot let his horse git away from him. Too bad, Cord. Too bad."

Cord's face was so purple I was afraid he would choke up and die of a stroke. He snarled, "I know all about that damn tenderfoot of yours. He killed one of my best men yesterday."

I said: "You are a liar. He shot himself."

Saturnino laughed, "But of course, Petey. He shoot himself."

Cord seemed to be glad to have a new point of attack. He sneered, "Where do you come in, Mex?"

I was appalled at what I saw in the face of Don Saturnino. I remembered what Footless had told me, "Don't never start nothing with Sat. He is jest plain murder."

I looked at Saturnino as he edged his horse forward. I saw that Slim and Hank were edging their horses forward. Hank looked pleased.

Idaho spoke sharply. "Sat!"

Saturnino paid no attention. Then the tension was broken by Cord's voice. He was saying, "No offense meant, Californio."

Saturnino smiled and bowed. "And no offense taken," he said.

Hank laughed with delight. He said: "Cord will never be closer to death then he was then. Not till I git him through my sights."

Saturnino flashed his white teeth. "You are the bloodthirsty, my good Hank. The Mister Cord, he is— Now, how you say it? He is my meat."

I looked down over my left shoulder. Cord and his two men were pounding away down the slope. Gail Gordon and the Rocking A girl had gone over the hill. There was not a cow in sight. Not a cow or a Rocking A cowpuncher. The dust was slowly settling on the roundup flat. The sun was way down in the west, and the black shadows were creeping out from under the hills.

Hank was laughing boisterously. "My Gawd!" he yelled. "No real cowman would 'a' stampeded a herd. It took a damn fool tenderfoot to do that."

Idaho was still struggling with his grin. He spoke to the rest of the men. "All right. Ought to be food at Bull Spring by now. Let's go."

It was dark when we reached Bull Spring. A fire in front of the dugout lit up the face of Footless, with a skillet in his hand, looking up the slope. The men began yelling: "Hey, Footless, kill a beef right away. I'm hungry."

Hank said, "I ain't jest hungry, I'm all ganted up."

Footless asked, "Why don't you go fishing? Ketch yourself a nice mess of trouts?"

A man said, "By God, I did use to ketch trout!" He mourned, "But that was a hell of a long way from here."

Andy Jackson came walking quickly on his short bowlegs. He told Idaho, "I shoved the cut beyond the ridge." He added, "The boys brought out a fresh remuda. They are holding them down the crick."

Idaho nodded, and Andy Jackson stamped away into the darkness. Somebody yelled: "Hey, Andy, Andy! Ain't you gonna kiss me?" Andy Jackson paid no attention.

Hank asked, "What's on your mind, old dry-belt?"

"Go down to the remuda and get fresh horses. Then shove these back toward the ranch."

I heard the clothes of men riding off in the darkness, riding down the rocky slope and I followed them. When I got down there I could dimly see a bunch of horses in a rope corral.

Saturnino told me, "I make the ketch for you, Petey."

I was glad of that. If I had gone in I should have scared them. Saturnino came out of the blackness with the loop of his rawhide rope around the neck of a horse. "It is the roan of your string, Don Petey."

I pulled my saddle off the tired sorrel, then the bridle.

The roan was not at all anxious to take the bit. I got him bridled and pulled the loop of the rope over his head. Sat asked, "You got?" I told him, "I got," and he rode away into the darkness.

I saddled the roan, mounted, and sat listening to the subdued sounds of men roping horses, unsaddling, saddling, and mounting. Saddles creaked, chaps swished, and spurs rattled. A horse began bucking wildly, and a man cursed, his curses seemingly jerked out of him when the horse hit the ground. Other men laughed gleefully.

There came the snap of ropes, and tired horses started up the slope. Men were all around me, men smelling of sweat and horses, men glad to be on fresh horses and to have a chance to eat.

Idaho's crisp voice came to us: "All right, boys, you can eat. Then hold the horses on that flat above the dugout."

Footless was beating on the bottom of a dishpan with a big iron spoon. "If you saddle bums want it, come and git it."

I soon had a tin plate between my knees—a plate piled high with chunks of boiled beef and boiled potatoes. The reins of the roan were on the ground just behind me.

Slim looked across my plate and asked Saturnino, "Ain't he going to founder hisself?"

Saturnino laughed through a mouthful of beef. I felt good.

I threw my plate, cup, and fork into the dishpan and wondered if I could keep awake until I got the roan unsaddled. Idaho was saying: "Slim, picket a few night horses. Hold the rest."

I picked up the reins and led the roan back to the edge of the firelight. There I unsaddled him, took the rope and walked up to a juniper stub, tied a bowline around his neck, and left him there. My saddle blankets stank with horse sweat. I pulled them around me and told

myself: You've got to stay awake until you get away. After that you can sleep.

I had a vague notion that Slim and Saturnino were standing over me. Saturnino laughed, saying: "He make the stay until the sunset. What you think, Slim? Do we make the hog-tie?"

The last thing I heard was Slim drawling: "Naw, he's dead to the world. He'll be asleep come noon tomorrow."

It was dark when I woke up. I blinked and lifted my head and spent a minute remembering who, and where, I was. Somebody had started up the fire and was squatted beside it. It was Footless with a huge coffee pot in his hand. I watched him rake out some red coals and set the pot on them.

The idea of the night before seemed better than ever. They might know what they were doing, but I couldn't see it. I rolled out of the wet saddle blankets, very quietly gathered up my saddle, and started up toward where I had left the horse.

Footless grumbled, and I stopped to see if anyone was stirring. A minute later I went on and then stood very still. Old Idaho was asking out of the darkness, "Going somewhere, Bub? Going somewhere?"

"Hell, no! Where would I be going?"

Idaho chuckled. "Slim threw your horse in with the bunch last night. The boys will run them in directly." After a minute he asked, "Ain't used to doing what you're told, be ye, Bub?" I started to say something, but Idaho added in a fatherly voice: "Go get a cup of coffee, Bub. Got a job for you."

I dropped the saddle and spread the still damp blanket over it. Walking down to the fire, I could smell horse sweat on my clothes from the wet saddle blankets.

Footless said, "Dig yourself a cup of coffee, Petey."

I dug out a tin cup and shoveled sugar into it, filled it

with hot black coffee, and squatted by the fire. The warmth was my welcome. I realized that if I had not been dead to the world, the night before, I should have thought I was freezing to death. I couldn't get used to the high desert—blistering by day and uncomfortably cold at night.

Hank's chaps and spurs swished and rattled as he came up to the fire rubbing his hands. "I'm getting old," he said. "I feel the cold. Now when I was a pup like Footless—"

Footless grumbled, "Hey, that's my cooking fire. If you want a heating fire, go make one."

Hank spoke soothingly. "You're dead right, Footless. Only pets can set by a cooking fire." He got a cup of coffee, came over, and sat down beside me. "These cooks! But damned if I ain't seen worse than even Footless."

Andy Jackson stumped up to the fire, got a cup of coffee, and went back into the darkness.

Footless grumbled: "Now, Andy Jackson, he's got manners. He was raised right."

Other men came to the fire, stretching, yawning, rubbing their hands in the welcome warmth. One grumbled: "This ain't no life for me. I was raised a pet, I was."

Slim and Saturnino came wth the cups of coffee. Slim tried to look surprised. "My, my! The top hand. He's still with us." Then he snickered.

Over my shoulder I could see the bulk of a juniper standing black against a pale eastern sky. It would be sunrise soon, and hot.

Slim asked, "Have a good ride, Petey?"

I spluttered into my coffee cup. "And to hell with you too."

There was a laugh from the men. They seemed to think they knew something, and it was funny.

Footless swung up, growling, "Hey, I gotta cook."

We all moved away from the fire. Some of the boys,

finishing their coffee, stumped off, saddled up, and rode down the slope. We ate fried beef, biscuits, and more coffee. By then it was daylight and the horses were coming up the slope, closely bunched.

In the broad daylight Idaho looked at me with frosty eyes. "Go back to Sacaton, Bub," he said, "and run the Corral. Tell Big Enough to stay in town until he hears from me."

He looked at me keenly, as though expecting me to say something; but when old Idaho used that tone and looked at you that way you didn't answer back. I moved down, reluctantly, to where Saturnino had roped my sorrel.

I dodged a whack on the back as Saturnino flashed his white teeth at me. He seemed to know all about it. "But, Don Petey," he was saying, "you see, you do not have the know but you can run the corral." He laughed. "And you and Fat and Big Enough and the mules and Spectacles all have the good time."

All that was true enough, but I wanted to go with the boys. Slim drawled: "Yeah, the real good time. My, my, you might even take a bath in the water trough!"

"I'll do just that."

"Yeah, but don't let nobody ketch you at it."

"What are you going to do?" I asked.

Slim gave me his bland grin. "Me? Me and Sat is going to ketch butterflies."

Footless yelled: "Hey, Petey! Hey, Petey! Come help me with these packs." He grumbled: "I ain't washing these dishes here. I'll wait till we git back to the ranch and I can git me plenty hot water."

Hank rode past. "My Gawd, Footless, you're gitting real shiftless."

Footless cursed him.

I watched them ride away to the east. At the top of the ridge the sun hit them, and they grew to a gigantic size. Then they were gone, and Footless was complaining,

"Hey, Petey, you feeling sick or what?" I turned and helped him pack the two horses.

Footless rode ahead, his peg leg stuck down inside the stirrup leather. We drove the two pack horses. I took down my rope, let out a length and tried to snap it at the pack animals the way I had seen Saturnino's rope snap out. I remembered the time Saturnino's long rawhide rope had slapped down over my arm.

Footless yelled back: "Hey, Petey! Don't do that. They'll foller."

I wound up the rope and tied it back beside the horn of the saddle. While I was doing that, I heard pounding hooves.

We had gone down the slope, splashed across the little creek, and started up the other slope. I looked back over my shoulder and saw Garvey and Andy Jackson following us: Garvey with his beard in reddish patches about two inches long. Every time I looked at Garvey I wondered how he managed it—it was always just that long.

Footless had pulled up, switched around in his saddle, asking, "Hey, Garvey, where you going?"

Garvey spoke sourly. "Me and Andy is going to the ranch and ride herd on a bunch of pets." Then he spat, contemptuously, under my horse, missing my boot heel by about an eighth of an inch.

I flared up then. I didn't like Garvey—never had liked him. I dug in spurs, the sorrel reared and came down so that my face was six inches from the reddish beard.

The bitterness of not being allowed to do what I wanted to do—go along, ride with the boys, go to war with the rest of them—flared up in me. Very quietly I said: "Do that again, Mister Garvey. You like to spit. Now you are going to spit and spit! And if one drop touches me or my horse—"

I never saw a man look so surprised as Garvey. His pale eyes opened wide, and he asked, "Hey?"

Footless yelled something at me.

I told Garvey, "Now spit. And keep on spitting until I say stop."

Footless drove his horse between us, and I was annoyed. I kicked at the flank of Footless's horse and faced Garvey again. "Now go on and spit, Mister Garvey. Keep on spitting!"

Garvey moved his hand, and I thought he was going after his gun. I yanked mine out and heard him grunt as I stuck it in his belly. "Go on," I told him. "Go on and spit. And keep on spitting, you—" I was so mad I was crying, and was horribly ashamed that I was crying.

A cool drawl came through my wrath: "My, my! The top hand, on the prod."

I heard a shout of laughter and got a whack on the back that increased my rage. Everything rose up in my head, all I had wanted to do and had not been allowed even to try. I backed the sorrel away and faced them, gun in hand. I snarled at them, "I'm going to make that red-bearded pinhead spit himself out right here and now."

Saturnino said: "But, Don Petey, you do not make the understand. Our good Garvey had the like for you."

"He had a hell of a way of showing it."

Garvey edged his horse over. "I'm right sorry, Petey. I ain't meaning no offense." He stuck out his hand.

I looked at his hand for a while so that I could get control of my voice. I stuck out my hand and found my gun still in it. I laughed and put the gun away, then shook hands with Garvey. "Go on," I told him, "Spit and be damned."

They laughed then, and Sat tried to whack my back but I saw it coming and dodged.

Slim spoke to Sat. "My, my, seems like we can't leave him alone a minute but what he goes to war."

I looked around so as to hide my eyes. Andy Jackson, without a word to anybody, had started driving the pack horses up the trail. I looked at Footless, Slim, Sat, and Garvey and saw them all grinning at me. I told Garvey, "I'm ashamed."

Garvey very carefully turned his head, spat off into the sagebrush, turned back to give me one of his sour grins. "Don't give it a thought."

We rode up the trail, and I began to hug myself, thinking of the friends I had made. I felt good.

There is no place so dreadfully deserted as a deserted cow ranch. A deserted house in a city is only another empty house. There are plenty of people in the adjoining houses.

But a cow ranch that you have known teeming with life of its own, and no other life in miles and miles, is a desolate place.

We pulled up on the ridge to watch Andy Jackson following the two pack horses down the steep slope to the Arrowhead. The pack animals were close to water and home and very willing to get it over with.

The river, rushing full-born from under the ledge and curving around the ranch, was sparkling gayly in the afternoon sun. Down below, the recently cut alfalfa was piled up in many dome-shaped haycocks. There was already a faint tinge of green on the field.

Slim said, "She needs water Garvey."

Garvey spat in assent. He asked sourly, "Why'n't we teach Petey to irrigate?"

I laughed at Garvey. I had begun to like him.

Beyond the river was the maze of corrals, and between the cottonwoods we could see the corners of the hay shed, the wagon shed, the bunkhouse, the cookhouse, and one

gleaming white corner of the home of Gail Gordon. Up beyond was the pine-clad knoll where the Arrowhead buried its dead.

Slim said, "Yeah, right pretty, but I'm all ganted up."

Footless asked, "Hey? Ganted up? Ain't I fed you bums oncet today?"

Slim put his horse down the steep hillside, and we trailed in after him. The bright water splashed up in my face, and I was as thirsty as the sorrel. I cupped my hat and drank and drank.

Up by the cookhouse Andy Jackson was unpacking the horses in his usual methodical, matter-of-fact way. I began to wonder if Andrew Jackson didn't ever weep or laugh or swear.

Slim asked Footless, "Ain't aiming to starve a hard-working hombre?"

"Starve? Hey, starve? If I was to eat as much as you, I'd grow me a new leg." He bobbed away up toward the cookhouse.

I saw the Arrowhead brand burnt into the door of the bunkhouse. Only two months ago I had pushed open that door for the first time, and seen a cowboy propped up on a bed looking at me from sardonic dead eyes.

Andy Jackson came in, lay down on his back on a bed, and went to sleep. Garvey sat handy to the fireplace. Slim gathered up the greasy pack of cards and started to lay out his solitaire game. He turned to talk to Garvey, and I saw Saturnino take out two cards and slip them under a ragged old magazine. He looked up with a blank look in his dark eyes.

They began their usual bickering about the cards. The sun went down in the west and shot a yellow shaft of light through the bunkhouse. The shaft of light seemed a solid thing that you could walk on. Then it was gone.

Saturnino patted his yawn, delicately, and moved the

magazine. He picked up the cards and showed them to Slim. "But, Slim, you should use all the cards."

Slim glared at Sat. He threw down the cards in disgust. "Someday, I'm going to paddle your behind worse'n your grandmother ever did."

Saturnino flashed his white teeth. "And me, Don Slim, I make the promise to be there."

CHAPTER XIV

In the cookhouse Footless was stumping around dishing out chunks of boiled beef, potatoes, saleratus biscuits, sorghum, and coffee. He complained, "Ain't had no time to make light bread. And you grub-line riders are gonna be living on sow belly day after tomorrow. Lessen you kill a beef."

Slim told him: "All right, Footless. We'll kill a beef." He grinned. "You think Rocking A beef would not be so damn tough as this Arrowhead stuff?"

"Hunh? Tough? Ain't I been telling you that's the last? Front legs. That's how come I boiled it."

"My, my! Live and learn." Slim poked at the pile of meat with his fork.

"I don't see the hoofs and horns in here, Footless. What'd you do with them?"

Footless stopped and looked at Slim's bland face. "Hunh?" he asked. "Hoofs and horns?" He stood blinking a minute, then whirled around on his peg leg to the sink, muttering, "My Gawd, hoofs and horns!"

The coal-oil lamps in the brackets along the wall burned with a yellow light. We had gathered at the lower end of the long table, near the huge wood-burning kitchen range. The place at the end was set, as always, for Gail Gordon; but only twice had I seen her there. Usually the shapeless Papago Indian woman came with a tray, sniffed around Footless' pots and pans and carried Gail Gordon's meals back into the sprawling ranch house.

Slim put his forearms on the table, knife and fork held

upright in each hand, and blandly asked me, "And could we ask you, Mr. Peter Stirling, what are your plans?"

I busily sopped up gravy with a piece of biscuit. "Of New York," I told him. "You forgot that."

As I looked at Slim, I was struck again by the creases running out from his eyes: the sign of the desert, of a man who spent his time looking out under a blistering sun across endless miles of the waste places. I noticed, now, that he had carefully combed his yellow hair.

I thought of the redhead Rocking A girl and snickered into my coffee cup. Slim gave me a quick suspicious look. I choked, and Saturnino began beating me on the back.

"But, Petey," he yelled, "why make the choke?"

Slim asked again, "Could we know, Mister Peter Stirling, of New York, what's on your mind?"

"Of course, my dear Slim," I told him. "It is no secret. After supper I shall saddle a horse, ride to Sacaton City, kick Big Enough out of the cot in the office, and go to bed. Come daylight, I shall take a bath in the water trough. After that I shall go and inquire as to the health of Fat. After that I shall eat at the New York Restaurant. After that I shall assume charge of the Arrowhead Corral —and may Gawd have mercy on its soul."

Footless whirled around on his peg leg to say, "Hey, Petey, you know them buckskins?"

I thought, Good Gawd, of course those buckskins are still in the stable there. I thought that had all happened a million years ago.

Footless went on, urgently: "You treat 'em right, Petey. Don't you go giving them none of that green alfalfa. I'll be in after 'em directly."

Saturnino said, "You know, Don Petey, the buckskins, they like the whisky: one very little drink."

Footless yelled, "Whisky! For them buckskins? You make me sick."

Andy Jackson cleaned up his plate, got out over the bench, put his hat on his head, and started for the door.

Slim said, "Andy."

Andy stopped to listen without turning his head.

"You run a fresh bunch in the corral and rope one of Petey's string."

Without nodding or speaking, Andy went out.

Garvey looked around for a place to spit and offered the opinion, "Andy ain't human."

Saturnino, Slim, Garvey, and I wandered down toward the bunkhouse, rolling brown paper cigarettes. Sulphur matches burned blue in the dusk and turned to bright yellow stabs at the darkness. My gray stood in front of the bunkhouse, saddled and bridled with rein on the ground. Andy Jackson was just going up into the bunkhouse. I said, "Thanks, Andy."

To the surprise of all of us he stopped in the doorway a minute, looked down at me, and said, "Watch yourself, Petey."

Garvey spat and said, "Well, I'll be damned."

I slid up onto the gray and listened.

Saturnino was saying, "You know what I think, Slim?"

"I ain't knowing that you do think."

Saturnino spoke seriously. "I think, Don Slim, it could be that the—what you call the—pay-off might be in Sacaton. I make the think that, now our good Idaho has made the hostile medicine, that Mister Cord go away. I think he not go for Mexico. For why should he?"

Slim said, "Go on talking, Sat."

Saturnino threw out his long slim-fingered hands. "For why should he?" He stopped and looked away into the night. It seemed a long time before he went on. "But, of course, there are the young ladies of the Arrowhead and the Rocking A."

Slim growled, "Hell, don't I know it?"

Saturnino flashed his white teeth at me in the darkness,

kneading my knee with his strong hand. "Do not make the think, Don Petey, that you do not have the work. I think our good Andy Jackson have the true word. Watch yourself, Petey."

Slim growled, "Yeah, watch yourself, Petey." He gave the gray a slap on the rump, and the horse very nearly left me sitting there in the air.

It was black night in the tunnel under the cottonwoods. Out of that there was still a faint light in the world. Up the long grade with the river and the alfalfa field down to the left hidden in the darkness. I could hear the faint murmur of running water. I shall never again, I told myself, waste water.

At the top of the grade I faced a faint glow in the west —away across the desert and the Faraway Hills.

I let the gray pick his own way down the hill, and daydreamed of the Faraway Hills—the Faraway Hills and Gail Gordon and a camp there, and no other people on earth.

The gray took his own time, feeling daintily for rolling rocks. I slumped down in the saddle and tried to go to sleep. The eerie laughter of a coyote came down from the hills. A desert whippoorwill began to mourn—to mourn over all poor Wills.

The next thing I knew, I swayed in the saddle and the gray side-stepped to keep me on his back. I patted his muscular neck and told him, "Thanks."

We were down in the mesquite flats, the dusty road winding in and out through the miniature forest. The cold night air was drifting down from the Great Peak of the Sacaton Mountains. I could smell the dust, the mesquite, and a faint tinge of sage.

I could see old Idaho with his hands shoved down inside his gun belt, then pulling up a hand to tug at his long white mustache, looking at me quizzically and asking, "What's on your mind, Bub? What's on your mind?"

I thought of Slim with his yellow hair, his sun-blackened face, and his slow grin. Then I snickered at the thought of the redhead at the Rocking A. Slim, about my own age, and the range boss of the Arrowhead!

And Don Saturnino Gallegas Maria Voca y Sonaita, the Californio, who had driven a herd of horses to Arizona from California, sold them to the Arrowhead, and stayed to work for Gail Gordon—Saturnino with his huge sombrero, his black pointed mustache, dark liquid eyes, and white teeth that were always flashing in a gay smile.

Garvey with his reddish beard and everlasting spitting: I was ashamed of having forced a run-in with Garvey. I discovered that I liked him.

And Hank with his hatbrim shoved straight over grizzled hair and a craggy face—Hank who seemed to want to go to war.

And Footless with his peg leg, his whisky, and his wild buckskin team—Footless, who had lost a leg in what they called "the other war."

Andy Jackson, going about his business in a very matter-of-fact way, saying nothing to anyone. Then I was startled to remember that Andy Jackson had said something to me. Standing on the steps of the bunkhouse he had gone far out of his way to tell me, "Watch yourself, Petey."

Well, there was nothing to that. Saturnino had said it might finish up in Sacaton City, but he was trying to console me because I had been shoved out of it: sent down to run the livery barn while the real men went to war. Well, they were right. I had no training for that.

They also serve who only stand and wait.

I kicked up the gray, telling him, "And you, Mister Milton, are a damn liar."

Great streaks of yellow light were running up the east-

cr n sky when the gray and I rumbled over the bridge into Sacaton City.

The lantern, hanging in the middle of the black gulf of the long barn, was smoking. The chimney was all sooted up, and no light came from it. I could smell it. The gray stopped dead and flicked his pointed ears forward. Then I heard why he stopped. Snorts, bubbles and roars were rising and falling and coming again from the office. That was the huge freighter, Big Enough, asleep and snoring. It was the most gorgeous snoring I had ever heard.

I slid off the gray, dropped the reins, and kicked open the door to the office. A voice bellowed at me, "Right where you are!"

"It's all right. Peter Stirling. Why the hell didn't you turn the lantern down?"

The cot creaked, and a sleepy voice asked, "That you, Petey?"

"No. And you can put your gun back under the pillow."

The great voice bellowed, "Ho, ho! My Gawd, Petey, come to look at it, I have got a gun." Then: "What's going on? You seen Slim? Where's Idaho? What's going on?"

"The lantern is smoking," I told him. I rummaged around looking for the other lantern.

Big Enough boomed out: "Gitting light, Petey. You don't need another lantern. It's under the cot. And this is a hell of a cot."

I kept my eyes away from the desk where I had found Whiskers with his brains running out of a hole in his head. And after that the stage driver had been killed, and Footless and Slim shot at; and before that I had found Al Meany dead with the buzzards watching him. But that was all over now—we all knew about the red-head Rocking A girl.

Stepping down from the office, I could see a square of

light at the other end of the barn. A horse nickered. I unsaddled the gray and let him go. He knew his way through the square of light at the other end of the barn, to the water trough. After a while he came back, water dripping from his muzzle, and walked into a stall. I tied him up, climbed the ladder against the wall, and began stuffing hay down the chute.

Other horses moved expectantly. I went along the holes, stuffing hay down. The hay rustled as the horses pulled it between the slats. The voice of Big Enough came booming, "Petey, this lantern is all smoked up."

Down in the long lane between the stalls he was fussing with the lantern. He muttered, "I'll take it up and let Torres clean it." Then he boomed: "What's going on around here? You seen Slim? Where's Idaho?"

"Yes, I saw Idaho. He said for you to stay here until you hear from him."

"Suits me, long as the whisky lasts. Now I'll get them mules real rested up—and me too. What's going on?"

I told him all I knew about what was going on, and was distressed that I didn't know any more.

Big Enough told me he was glad I was taking over the corral: he was sick of playing chambermaid to half-broken broncs. "Let's go see Fat and then fill our bellies."

Out front in broad daylight, I looked up at the man. I am an even six feet, but he towered over me and stuck out on both sides. I concluded I should hate to have him get his hands on me. I asked him, "Why do you pack a six-shooter? You can reach as far as it will shoot."

His laugh seemed to wake up Sacaton City. Spectacles came out from his little boxlike adobe across the way and started for the Arrowhead Trading Co. He stopped and asked, "Hey, Petey, where's Slim? I told you I had to see Slim."

I waved to him. "You'll see him some time. Forget it. Don't you know there is a war going on?"

He blinked behind his spectacles. "War? What war?"

He was still staring as we plodded up the road. The sunlight touched the top of the false front of the Palace Saloon and slid slowly down.

Big Enough said, "I ain't no good till I have me a slug of whisky."

We went under the wooden awning in front of the Palace and walked inside. Old Torres was sweeping out. There seemed no place so desolate as the Palace in the early morning with the swamper sweeping out. All the beer and whisky that had ever been drunk seemed to taint the air. The gaming tables along the right-hand wall were covered with black oilcloth. The empty high chairs of the lookouts, back against the wall, accentuated the desolation.

Old Torres bobbed his head, grinned, and went behind the bar. He set out a bottle and glasses and then shot a torrent of Spanish at the big freighter.

"What is he saying?" I asked.

Big Enough grunted, "Don't bother me." He poured half a water glass of whisky, poured it down in one gulp, shivered and blinked, and then smiled. "Now I kin face life. What you say, Petey?"

"What did he say?"

They threw some more Spanish at each other. Big Enough smiled broadly. "Torres says he don't like it."

"What?"

Big Enough boomed with laughter. "He says he don't know. But it's no good."

"I know that," I told him. "Let's eat."

Fat came from his bedroom built into the left side of the barroom, beyond the bar. He beamed at us, stretched and yawned, and came along behind the bar. His hair

was slicked down, and his handlebar mustache in fine order.

"When'd you get in, Petey?" Without waiting for an answer he went on: "Going to eat? I'll tag along."

But we never ate that breakfast.

I pushed open the front door, and a hot sun hit me in the face. Horses were running. Shading my eyes, I looked up the road to the south, toward Mexico and the Rocking A road.

Two horses were running into town, but the sun was in my eyes so that I could not make them out at first. Something was wrong with the picture. Then I saw that one of the riders was holding onto the saddle horn with both hands and bumping in the saddle, riding as no Arizona cowpuncher could possibly ride. The other rider came smoothly on with head on shoulder looking back.

Big Enough boomed out: "Ho, ho! What's going on here?"

Then I recognized the riders. It was the Rocking A girl, Ruth Armstrong, and Gail Gordon.

Ducking under the hitch rail, I ran out to meet them. Relief swept over me that Gail Gordon was no longer at the Rocking A. The horses dropped to a walk; they were all in. As soon as they stopped they hung their heads and panted, rivers of sweat making black marks down their dusty sides.

"What happened!" I demanded.

Gail Gordon regarded me gravely. Her dark blue eyes were black. Looking back over her shoulder, she turned to me again; and I got a great thrill as she told me, "I'm glad you're here, Peter."

Big Enough loomed up beside me, and I looked around for Fat. Just then he came out the door with a glass in each hand. He walked up between the girls, handed each a glass, and ordered, "Drink this."

Then I noticed that the red hair of the Rocking A girl was tumbled around her shoulders and her face was drawn as though she had reached the last limit of endurance.

"Thank you," she said, drank a swallow, spluttered and choked.

Gail Gordon told her, "Drink it," and drank her own down. "Thanks, Fat." Again she looked over her shoulder. "I think they are not far behind."

As they climbed stiffly from their saddles I asked, "Who?"

"Cord and Spike, and some more of them."

I whirled. "Look, Fat," I said. "Let them lie down in your room. I'll put up the horses and bring over a tray of breakfast from the restaurant."

Also, I wanted to get my rifle from the corral.

Fat said: "Jest the thing. Them adobe walls have turned bullets afore now."

Ruth Armstrong asked, "Bullets?"

Big Enough pulled out the biggest six-shooter I ever saw, looked at it, and shoved it back in the holster.

The horses and saddles belonged to Rocking A. As I slid onto one and picked up the reins of the other, I asked Gail Gordon, "But what happened?"

She turned back. "Ruth finally realized what sort of person Cord is, and what he is up to." She came back to look up at me and spoke earnestly. "And she found her papers, the ones she had signed for Cord. We brought them along."

"But how did you get away?"

She smiled at me. "They locked the door, but we got out a window. They had up a couple of saddled night horses, and we took them."

Big Enough shouted with laughter. "Ho, ho! You're your old man's daughter." Then he yelled at me, ten feet away, "And bring my rifle too, Petey."

As I rode off I asked over my shoulder, "Why didn't

you ride for Bull Spring, where the boys are?" but I couldn't hear what she said.

I watched them go into the Palace as I kicked at the half-dead horse. When I rode into the cool gloom of the barn, there was still no sign of men at the other end of town.

"You'll get water after a while," I told the Rocking A horses as I unsaddled and fed them. As I passed behind one of Footless' buckskins the pony reared back and broke his halter rope. He stood there a minute, showing the whites of his eyes. Then he turned and trotted out front. In the sunlight he stopped a minute, looked around, shook his head, and started at a trot for the bridge, the broken halter rope dragging from his neck.

I thought I would saddle the gray; a horse might be handy. Then I changed my mind—he might get shot. I thought of something and snickered, wondering what the Rocking A girl, from Vermont, would think of the fact that Gail Gordon was half-owner of the Palace Saloon.

I got the rifles from the office and started on a half-run for the front, then stopped, took off my hat, and peered cautiously around the edge of the door. There was a group of men up at the other end of town—a group of men sitting their horses there, looking down the empty street of Sacaton City. Even at that distance I could recognize the red and white calfskin vest of Cord. I counted five men.

CHAPTER XV

NATURALLY, having been but three months in the Territory of Arizona, only three months from the orderly and secure life of New York, my first thought was of the police. If I had not been scared I would have snickered at the thought of the police. There were no police in Sacaton City—not even a city marshal. You fought your own wars and came out alive if you could.

I remembered Fat, the barkeep, patting his sawed-off shotgun and smilingly telling me that was "the Law in Sacaton."

The memory cheered me up a little. Fat, Big Enough, and Torres were in the Palace with Gail Gordon and the Rocking A girl, and they would protect them. I wished I were up there and wondered if I couldn't make it.

I peeked around the edge of the door again. There was no one in sight now. Cord and his men must have pulled back out of the road—probably were making their way along down behind the buildings. But which side of the road?

I wished that Slim and Saturnino were there, that old Idaho and Hank and the rest of them would come. I wished I had taken time to ask Gail Gordon more about things. Where were Dolores and her son Manuel? Had they ridden for Bull Spring and the ranch, or followed the road to Sacaton City—or were they dead?

I realized my own inexperience, my incompetence for what lay ahead. I grew bitter over it: life had no right to force such a situation on me.

I remembered Gail Gordon had hurriedly said something about Ruth Armstrong and papers. Papers? What papers? Papers that Cord wanted.

I looked out again, up the empty street. There was nothing living in sight, and no sound. Sacaton City might be deserted, or tenanted only by the dead. Then it seemed to me I jumped a yard as one of Big Enough's mules let loose a great heehaw.

Movement across the way caught my eyes. It was Spectacles, coming out of the screen door onto the loading platform, shading his eyes with his hand and calling out: "Hey, Peter. Where is Slim? I got to see Slim."

"You damn fool! Oh, you damn fool!" I muttered in panic. I was whispering: "Now you have given me away. Now Cord knows where I am."

I put Big Enough's rifle between my knees and motioned frantically with the empty hand for Spectacles to go back in the store and keep his mouth shut.

He yelled out, "What?"

It happened while I was still motioning, and my hand hung in the air when I saw him suddenly spin halfway round, throw up his arms, and fall face downward on the loading platform. Then I heard the slam of the shot.

Frozen, I watched Spectacles quiver, roll off the platform, and land on his back in the dust. I watched to see if he moved. I thought he did. Whenever I shifted my eyes, they came back to him with the certainty that he had moved. I became obsessed with the idea that if I looked away he moved. It was only when I looked at him that I knew he would never move.

The wanton brutality of the killing of Spectacles swept me with cold rage. I knew now why men killed.

Looking up the street again, I thought I saw a faint haze of powder smoke hanging in the still air. It seemed to be slowly drifting from my own side of the street. But I couldn't be sure. It might not even be smoke. And if

I was going to kill and not be killed I had better be sure.

I thought longingly of Slim, Saturnino, Footless, frosty-eyed old Idaho, and the rest of them, I remembered Footless' complacent remark, "The Arrowhead looks after its own."

"The hell it does!" I muttered. Then I thought of the buckskin with the broken halter rope starting out on his own for the Arrowhead. But there was scant comfort in that. It would be night before he got there, and then it might not mean anything to them.

I looked again up the empty street. No one. No movement. No sound. It was getting on my nerves. It was a comfort to reflect that if they attacked the Palace Saloon from the front I was in a good place to make it unpleasant for them. But they wouldn't be so foolish. I must get across the road and go up behind the buildings.

Spectacles still lay there, his face turned up to the merciless sun. I wanted to shade his eyes from the sun—but Spectacles was indifferent to that.

It seemed a long way across the road to the protection of the Arrowhead Trading Co. "Yah," I jeered, "the Arrowhead looks after its own!"

I found that I was trying to count the yards from the door of the barn to the corner of the store, across miles and miles of sunlit dust. My muscles tightened for the jump and tightened still more as if in that way I could keep out a bullet.

With a rifle in each hand I got ready for the run, and then stopped to listen to running horses, to horses running wildly and the slam of a shot. At first I could not locate the sounds. The horses seemed to be out back, and the shot up the street.

Then I was frightened by a blotting out of the sunlight at the back door of the barn. The other end of the barn seemed to be filled with men and plunging horses. There

was the slam of another shot, and an angry yell from out back.

The men were between me and the light, and I could not recognize them. I dropped Big Enough's rifle, threw mine up to my shoulder, and, through the sights, saw the huge sombrero of Saturnino.

Saturnino yelled gayly. "But, Petey, why you make the shoot?"

Slim growled: "Crazy. Jest plain crazy."

At first I felt weak—my knees wanted to buckle; but then they stiffened, and I felt fine. Slim and Saturnino had slid off their horses. Leaving them with reins hanging, they came forward swiftly, their rifles in their hands.

Slim grinned at me, briefly. "Where are they?"

"Up at the other end of town. I think they are working down behind the buildings to attack the Palace from the rear."

Slim looked blank, but Saturnino flashed his white teeth in a gay smile.

"But no, Petey. Slim has the anxiety about the young ladies."

"Oh, them! They're up in the Palace with Fat, Big Enough, and Torres."

Slim looked relieved.

They had both noticed Spectacles: "Cord and his gang," I told them. I was about to let loose a lot of questions but held them back at the sound of another shot and a metallic ring out back.

Slim said, "The water trough."

A yell of rage from out back was followed by long drawnout, spluttering, choking curses.

Slim and Saturnino looked at each other and then down the length of the barn. Saturnino said, "Footless. I see." He started back and I followed, telling Slim over

my shoulder, "Don't stick your head out." Slim grinned and waved.

Walking around the horses, we saw a figure crawling in the back door. Saturnino was all concern as he hurried up. "But, Footless, do they get you?"

It was Footless, on his belly, dragging his peg leg—and soaking-wet. He began to curse: long strings of bitter oaths and name calling—names I had never even heard of.

Saturnino broke in. "But, Footless, are you hit?"

Footless cursed some more, ending: "Hit? Hunh? Naw, I ain't hit; but they dropped my horse, and I took cover behind the water trough." On his hands and knees he shook his wet head, and water dripped from him. "They shot a hole in the tank, and all that God-damn water run all over me."

Saturnino stared an instant, then doubled up with laughter. He leaned against the side of a stall and yelled with delight.

Well, of course, it was funny; but in the situation we were in I couldn't raise more than a brief grin.

Footless looked up. "Hey, Petey. You ain't got ary drink on you?"

I helped him to his feet. "Sorry, Footless. But Big Enough slept in the office last night. He may have left some."

Footless swung away on his peg leg, "I'll look see. 'Taint healthy to get all drowned that-a-way."

That set Saturnino off again.

Slim called to us. "Petey, git them horses out of the way. You come here, Sat."

I stood my rifle against a stall, unsaddled the horses, tied them in stalls, climbed the ladder, and stuffed hay down the chutes.

When I came down Footless was sitting on the step to

the office, a whisky bottle in his hands. He blinked at me. "Right nice of Big Enough."

Slim asked, "Where's your rifle, Footless?"

Footless blinked. "Hunh? Rifle?" He thought that over. "It's under that dead horse out back. I couldn't git it out."

Saturnino began to laugh again. I looked across at Spectacles, dead on his back with the sun searing his eyeballs. I couldn't see anything to laugh at.

I told Saturnino, "You devil!"

He started to whack me, and I flashed back, "Don't do it."

Slim walked over to Footless and took the bottle away from him. "That's enough for now." He jerked a finger at Big Enough's rifle. "Take that, and watch the back. Don't let 'em git in behind us."

Footless swung up on his peg leg, picked up the rifle, worked the lever to see if it was full, and hitched along the length of the barn.

Slim grinned. "If anybody gits past Footless, they can have me."

An instant later the barn was filled with the roar of Footless' rifle. He looked at us. "Whee! I got one, Slim."

I had a thousand questions for Slim, and I asked them all at once, so that they tumbled over one another. Absent-mindedly Slim told me that, in the night, Manuel, Dolores' son, had come to old Idaho at Bull Spring with word that Gail Gordon and Ruth Armstrong had got away from the Rocking A and were on the road to Sacaton City.

Idaho had sent Manuel and a couple of the men to the ranch to tell Slim and Saturnino to ride to Sacaton City. The rest were to stay at the ranch, ready to hold it—in case. Idaho, Hank, and the other boys had started a wild run over the rocky slopes down to the Rocking A road in

hope of cutting in between the girls and Cord's gang.

I told Slim all I knew, ending with the five men up at the end of the street and the killing of Spectacles. "Somebody ought to cover his face."

Slim shrugged. "Spectacles don't care now."

Saturnino put his arm across my shoulders, very gently. "Do not let it get you, Don Petey. That is the way it is."

I wanted to cry.

Saturnino said, "You know what I think, Slim?"

"All right, I'll listen this one time, and what the hell. Git it off your chest."

Saturnino flashed his white teeth. "I think, Slim, we make the—what you call it—the pretty sit."

"The young ladies," he went on, "they are in the Palace with Fat, Big Enough, and the good Torres. That is very nice. Very nice indeed. Our good Footless is out back and do not let them come that way. Now I go across the road and do not let them come to the back of the Palace. You and Petey are here and do not let them come down the road. You see, Slim? We hold them. Then very soon Don Idaho and the boys come, and we make the clean-up."

Slim said, "I thought of all that before you did, Sat."

Sat's white teeth flashed. "All right," he said. "Now I go."

But I beat him to it.

I have tried, since, to think why I made that move. It was not because I did not want my friend Saturnino to take the chance. I wanted to do it because it seemed to be the quickest way for me to look again into the unfathomable eyes of Gail Gordon.

I threw my rifle up into the crook of my left arm and started to run. I ran like hell—conscious of the blow of the hot sun on my back, of shots slamming along the walls of the houses. A spurt of dust came up in front of me. Then two more. I said out loud, "They are shooting at

me." Another one, I almost stepped into. I heard Slim and Saturnino yelling. I wanted to stop and put my hat over Spectacles' face.

A pinch of dust came out of my left shoulder and stung my nostrils. I ran on and on. It seemed to me I had been running all my life. Then the heavenly shade of the Arrowhead Trading Co. received me, and I leaned against the wall and gulped air and relief.

Back across the sun-blistered road in the barn, Slim put his thumb to his nose and wiggled his fingers at me.

If I were to live with those men for a thousand years, still I should not understand them.

Getting my breath, I stuck my thumb to my nose at Slim and Saturnino. Then I walked along the adobe wall, keeping close against it in the thin band of shade, with the rifle in the crook of my left arm. To my surprise, it was cocked. I left it that way.

At the back corner of the building I stopped and listened. All I could hear was my heart thumping at my eardrums. I had to get out to where I could see the back door of the Palace. I drew a deep breath and stepped around the corner—stepped around the corner to look into the bloodshot eyes of Spike.

Spike was crouching, sneaking up to the corner, to a place where he could shoot at Slim and Saturnino. His eyes widened and then went nasty. He snarled, "You!" shot at me, and stood up to shoot again.

My cocked rifle lay across my left arm and, without thinking at all, I pulled the trigger.

Spike wrapped his hands across his belly, said, "Ah-h!" and slumped onto his knees. Feebly, he began searching for his six-shooter. I worked the lever of the rifle and watched him. There on his knees he kept fumbling around for something. I watched and wanted to vomit. After a while he said something I didn't get, and lay down very carefully on his face.

I went on to the back corner of the next building, to the corner of the little adobe from which a cheerful Spectacles had come out only this morning. I couldn't believe it was only a few hours ago. It was years and years ago.

I walked along to the other corner and measured the distance to the next house. After that there was only one more, and then the Palace Saloon. I ran across to the next house, heard the sound of a rifle and listened to the shrill whine of a bullet that glanced off the adobe wall in front of me. The bullet seemed to go on and on for miles, whining as it went—whining as if sorry it had missed its target. I crouched down against the wall and, suddenly, felt very much alone in the world.

I tried to keep my mind away from Spike and think of what I had to do. But Spike, with his head shaped like an adder, kept forcing himself on me. For a month I had been scared whenever I saw Spike, scared even when I thought of him. Then I had pulled a trigger, and there wasn't any more Spike; but I knew Spike was going with me for a long time.

A man laid a rifle over a grave mound up on Boot Hill. I saw the smoke pour out and heard the tinkle of glass from the back window of the Palace. I got down on one knee, aimed very carefully, and pressed the trigger. The man spread his arms and dropped forward over the grave mound. "It's as easy as that," I told myself. "You point your rifle at them, and then they aren't there any more."

I ducked across to the corner of the Palace, and stopped to listen to wild yells and gunshots from the upper end of town.

A man was running up behind me and I switched my rifle to cover the gun belt of Saturnino. His white teeth flashed at me. "You come."

He kicked at the back door of the Palace, and some-

body stuck a six-shooter out of a broken window pane. A girl's voice said, "Go away."

I laughed and yelled, "Hey, Vermont! Stop it. Let us in."

The girl said, "Oh!" with relief, and fumbled with a key. Somebody yelled at her, and she answered. I watched the grave mounds up on Boot Hill and thought she would never get the door open.

Inside, my eyes widened in the gloom of the long room. Ruth Armstrong was white-faced, and looked disappointed when no one followed us in. She asked, "Where is Slim?"

"He's all right. Lock the door."

She locked it and went back to watch at the broken window.

Gail Gordon came out of the gloom, looking at me as she went past. "You all right, Peter?"

I told her, "Yes" and went on along the bar. Fat's bedroom door was open, and Torres was crouching at a corner of the window with a rifle. The window was up a few inches.

Things were clear now in the shady room, and I could see Fat and Big Enough on their knees, each at a window beside the front door. Fat had his sawed-off shotgun, and Big Enough was resting the barrel of his huge six-shooter on the window sill. There was broken glass around Fat: several panes had been shot out.

Big Enough boomed out, "Ho, Petey, you got my rifle?"

"No, Footless has it down at the corral. Slim and Footless."

"Gimme your rifle, Petey. I aim to git me one of them Rocking A's."

"The hell I will!" I looked out over his head. The

acrid smell of burnt powder filled the room, stinging my nose and making me cough.

Saturnino yelled, "There's Idaho!"

Across the street old Idaho was coming along the side of the New York Restaurant. He looked back and waved, and three Arrowhead men came up behind him. The shooting had stopped at the upper end of town. The silence seemed almost as scary as the shooting.

Somebody yelled at the upper end of town. There were yells and answering angry yells. Idaho walked calmly out into the street, looking up at the south end of town. I broke out the front door and stopped dead at sight of Cord's red and white calfskin vest. With his back to us he was halfway up the street on a restless horse, a six-shooter in his hand. He kept reining his horse back.

I yelled at Idaho, "What the hell?" but he paid no attention.

Gail Gordon was at my shoulder. "What is it?"

"You go back inside," I ordered. But she didn't pay any attention either.

White smoke was pouring out from a corner of a building at the upper end of town and the slam of a shot rolled along the houses. Cord's horse screamed, stood straight up, and then went down in a heap. Cord stood beside the dead horse, firing with his six-shooter, knocking out bits of dirt from the corner of the adobe. A man from up there yelled at Cord, and Cord yelled back, "Go to hell."

An Arrowhead man on a horse came from out back, yelling, "They're pulling out, Idaho—pulling out for Mexico!"

Idaho nodded and kept on watching Cord.

Fat came out with his sawed-off shotgun, asking, "Will I let him have it, Idaho?"

Gail Gordon answered sharply, "No!" and Idaho shook his head.

She told Idaho: "Let them go. Call in the boys. I won't have any more shooting if they are going." Sharply: "Idaho!"

Idaho nodded and spoke to the mounted Arrowhead man. He rode off behind the Palace and began yelling. A group of Rocking A men were kicking their horses into a run up the long dusty slope that led to Mexico.

Cord shoved his six-shooter back into the holster, turned around, and raised his hands above his head. He started walking toward us.

Saturnino laughed. "How is you say it? When the thieves fall out—"

Hank came riding up, his hatbrim flipped straight up, a pleased look on his craggy face. "Fine and dandy," he told Idaho. "Me and the boys will look after Cord." He took his rope off the saddle and whipped out a loop.

Big Enough boomed out, "That's right, Hank. Bring him to the corral. We can hang him on that hay rig in front of the barn."

A murmur of approval rose from the gathering Arrowhead men, but Gail Gordon's voice dominated the murmur. "Stop it!" she ordered.

Hank pleaded, "Aw, now, Gail!"

"Hank, put up your rope. Put it up!"

Slim walked past us, saying, "I'll jest take your belt and gun, Cord, so you won't hurt yourself."

Idaho asked, "What's on your mind, Cord?"

Cord put his hands down and talked. "I'm right sorry, Idaho. I didn't aim to have no trouble. There is a bad misunderstanding all around. I can explain it to you."

Angry, derisive yells burst from the Arrowhead men. Idaho ordered, "Shut up."

I broke in. "Who killed Spectacles?"

"Spectacles!" a man gasped. "Did they kill Spectacles?" You could sense their attitude: Spectacles was not a fighting man—there was no earthly reason for killing Spectacles. I thought for a minute that Idaho and Gail Gordon together would be unable to save Cord's life.

Cord protested, hurriedly: "It was Spike. I tried to stop it. I swear to God I tried to stop it."

"Where is Spike?" somebody growled.

Saturnino laughed. "Ask Don Petey."

They looked at me, and I said: "He's down there. He's dead."

Footless yelled. "Whee! I knowed it. I knowed it, and I done told you. You can't beat Petey with a gun."

Saturnino laughed and knocked dust out of my back.

Idaho's icy voice came again. "What's on your mind, Cord?"

"I'm through here—" Cord broke off to listen to more derisive yells. A mere spark would set the men off and bring about his death.

Gail Gordon spoke sharply. "Stop it."

Idaho told one of the boys, "Give him your horse." He turned to Cord. "Better ride for it, Cord. Some of the boys might get mad."

Cord, with a look of profound relief, started toward the horse.

Saturnino walked up to him. "But, Mister Cord, I think you carry too much to make the long ride." With a swift move he pulled Cord's shirt and undershirt out from his belt and began unbuckling a money belt.

Cord started to move his hands and to protest, then looked at the angry faces around him and stood still.

Saturnino unstrapped the heavy money belt. The three compartments were filled with bills of high denomination. There must have been thousands of dollars in the belt. With a gay smile Saturnino threw the belt to Slim

and bowed to Cord, saying, "I think now you ride more easy, Mister Cord."

Cord rode away. We stood there silent, watching the beaten man go to the north, across the bridge, and take the road to Tucson. We were brought back by Saturnino's question, "You know what I think, Slim?"

Slim had his arms around the Rocking A girl, the money belt hanging down her back as he patted her shoulder, and was murmuring things to her.

I turned to look at Gail Gordon. Her eyes came away from Slim and the girl to me, dropped and then came up again to meet mine, steadily A slow flush crept up her cheeks.

I started walking toward her, and she waited for me. From a great way off I heard men laughing and talking. Footless was yelling, "Hey, Fat, come do your stuff."

I kept on walking toward Gail Gordon.

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